FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

Mabel C. Hawley

To- Margaret Ann Holyfield
From- Betty & Buck
1942

They tumbled downstairs to find the four stockings bulging with knobby packages.

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BY

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Four Little Blossoms Through the Holidays

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FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

CHAPTER I

TWADDLES MAKES A GIFT

"WHERE'S the soap, Norah?" demanded Meg importantly. "The soap and the scrubbing brush and a clean towel, please. I need them very much."

Norah looked at her calmly.

"And why do you be wanting to take a scrubbing brush and the soap down cellar?" she asked. "What are you all up to down there, anyway? I can't get Twaddles to go to the store for me, and Dot has been poking about in the pantry till she has me wild. What are you doing anyway?"

"Why, you know, Norah, I told you last week," replied Meg. "We're getting the

Thanksgiving stuff ready to take to school; all the children bring something good to eat and then it is collected and the poor people have a Thanksgiving Day dinner."

"Well, I've been poor in my time," said Norah, tying on her clean, white apron and preparing to start her dinner, "but never have I been so starved that I could eat soap or, for that matter, a scrubbing brush or a towel, even if 'twas a clean one."

Meg's blue eyes widened in surprise, and then she laughed.

"Oh, Norah, how funny you are!" she cried. "You know I don't want the soap for the poor people to eat! I want to wash the potatoes for them!"

And then it was Norah's turn to laugh. She laughed till the tears came in her eyes and she had to take her clean apron to wipe them away.

"Meg, Meg, you'll be the end of me yet!" laughed Norah. "Who ever heard of scrubbing potatoes with soap and water and using a towel to dry 'em? Won't Sam snicker when I tell him!"

"I don't see anything funny about that," said Meg, edging toward the cellar door. "I want to take nice, clean potatoes and you wash those we eat, you know you do, Norah."

"Yes, child, that I do," admitted Norah kindly and her voice was sober though her eyes still twinkled. "But water and a good stiff brush will be all your potatoes need. They'll dry of themselves and you won't need the towel; and the soap would spoil 'em completely if the poor people should be wistful to have 'em baked."

"Meg, what you doing? Did you get the soap yet?" shouted Bobby from the bottom of the cellar steps.

"Here's the brush," said Norah, hastily giving Meg the small vegetable brush from the shelf over the sink. "Now be off with you and don't let me find water all over the laundry floor either; drowning Dot in water isn't going to help the poor folks."

Meg ran down the steps and joined the other children who were exceedingly busy. Bobby was sorting over the apples in the apple bin and trying to keep Twaddles from eating the

perfect ones he selected. Dot had filled the laundry tubs with hot water and was only waiting Meg's return to put in the turnips and potatoes to be thoroughly washed. As for Twaddles, he was walking up and down before the preserve closet, munching apples, and trying to decide which jar of preserves he would choose. Mother Blossom had promised each of the children one jar of jelly, jam or canned fruit, to take to school.

"And Dot and Twaddles may send something, too," she had said, when the twins as usual declared that they never had any of the fun because they were too young to go to school. "Meg and Bobby will take your thank-offering to school for you, twinnies."

It was warm and dry in the cellar and the electric light made it bright even though it was already dark outside at half-past four that November afternoon. The glowing heater occupied one end of the cemented room and the laundry tubs the other. In between were the vegetable and fruit bins and closets where food

that would keep through the winter had been stored.

"Norah says we don't use soap on the potatoes," reported Meg to Dot. "Maybe we shouldn't have hot water, either."

"Course we need hot water," insisted Dot, who was already splashed from head to foot. "Hot water is the only way to get 'em clean."

"There's Sam—we'll ask him," said Bobby as someone opened the door of the cellar and came in, bringing a blast of cold, fresh air.

"Well, you look happy," smiled Sam Layton, who ran the car and mowed the lawn in summer and took care of the heater in winter for the Blossom family. "What mischief are you into now?"

"Sam, don't you wash turnips and things like that in hot water?" demanded Dot earnestly.

"So that's it," cried Sam. "I knew, soon as I saw the cloud of steam from the laundry tubs, that something was going on. Are you counting on washing vegetables in Norah's pet tubs and in that boiling hot water?"

"They're for the poor folks," explained

Bobby, polishing an apple by the simple method of rubbing it on his stocking. "We have to take 'em to school tomorrow and we want them to be clean."

"Very nice and quite correct," approved Sam seriously. "But somehow it doesn't fit in with my sanitary ideas to wash vegetables where the clothes are done or polish apples on stockings, Bobby."

"I meant to get a rag," said Bobby quickly. "Norah will give me one. What shall we do to the potatoes, Sam?"

Sam explained that he thought the best thing to do was to borrow a pan from Norah and scrub the vegetables with the brush in water not too cold for their hands and yet not hot enough to shrivel the skin of the turnips and potatoes.

"How you going to get your stuff over to school?" he asked, when Bobby had gone after the pan and returned with both pan and Norah, who declared that she knew she would have to help them. "Potatoes weigh heavy, when you try to carry them."

"Daddy said you'd take us in the car," re-

plied Meg. "You will, won't you, Sam? We have potatoes and carrots and turnips and apples and four jars of fruit to take."

"Then you certainly can't walk," said Sam, shaking the heater and raising his voice above the racket he made. "I guess I can take you before your father is ready to go in the morning."

When the vegetables were all nicely washed, and the laundry floor mopped up, and Dot placed before the heater to dry off, since she refused to go upstairs and get into another dress, and the apples polished to Bobby's liking, then it was time to choose the cans of fruit.

The twins could not make up their minds. Dot wavered between her two favorites, blackberry jam and orange marmalade, and Twaddles insisted on peach butter and mustard pickles.

"Mother said one," Meg reminded him. Meg had her own jar of canned pears she had filled herself and labeled with a little red label. "Filled by Meg, October 2," Mother Blossom had written, and Meg was eager to give the jar

away because, as she said, it was something she had done herself.

"Well, pickles don't count," argued Twaddles. "Pickles are extra."

Bobby had chosen his favorite strawberry jam and he was anxious to go upstairs and see if dinner wasn't almost ready.

"Hurry up, Twaddles!" he urged his small brother. "We can't wait all night. Which do you want, Dot?"

"Blackberry jam," said Dot, shutting her eyes and gulping as she always did when she had to make a choice.

"Children, dinner will be ready in a minute!" Mother Blossom called down to them.

"Now, you see," scolded Bobby. "Take the pickles, Twaddles, and put them over there with the apples. I have to lock up the closet."

Bobby took the jar of peach butter out of Twaddles' hands and put it back on the shelf. Then he locked the door of the preserve closet and put the key in his pocket to give his mother.

Twaddles scowled.

"I didn't want pickles," he said. "You're

mean, Bobby Blossom. I hope the poor folks will throw away your old apples."

Twaddles never could stay cross very long, though, and before dinner was over, he was teasing with Dot to be allowed to go to the school the next day with Meg and Bobby.

"Please, Daddy," pleaded the twins. "We're sending things for the poor people to eat and can't we go and see them?"

"They won't be there," said Meg hastily. "The Charity Bureau comes and gets the stuff and gives it to the poor people; don't they, Bobby?"

Bobby nodded and Father Blossom laughed.

"Now, Twaddles, don't begin to see a nice comfortable walnut bureau like the one in Mother's room going around collecting food for the poor folk," he said teasingly. "I can see your big eyes beginning to wonder what a Charity Bureau is. That is only a name for the kind men and women who go around taking care of hungry and cold people."

But though Dot continued to tease to be allowed to go to school the next day, Twaddles'

busy little brain kept thinking about the "Charity Bureau." He couldn't understand—Twaddles was only four years old—exactly why men and women who collected food for hungry people should be called a bureau, and the more he thought about it, the more tangled up he became. When bedtime came for him and Dot he was still puzzling over it and it was not till the next morning that he decided what he should do.

Meg and Bobby were seated on the front seat of the car with Sam Layton, and the vegetables and apples and fruit jars were carefully arranged on the back seat, when Twaddles came running out of the house. Mother Blossom had said the twins were not to go to school—much to Meg's and Bobby's relief—and Meg at first thought Twaddles was determined to have his own way.

"Go back, Twaddles! Mother said you couldn't go," she cried, when Twaddles bounced on the running board.

"I'm not going! I brought you something!"

gasped Twaddles, breathless from running. "It's for the Charity Bureau."

Meg took the little box, wrapped in white tissue paper, and Sam started the car. The twins stood and waved to Bobby and Meg as though they were going on a voyage instead of to school where they went every school day morning, and Meg did not look at the package till Sam suggested that it might be well to see what was in it.

"You never can tell what Twaddles is going to do," observed Sam sagely, "and if I were you, I'd want to know what I was taking to the Bureau for him."

Meg unwrapped the box while Bobby and Sam stared curiously. When she lifted the cover, there lay a bottle of cologne!

"It's his own bottle, the one he bought with his own money and Daddy laughed at him so," said Meg. "Twaddles does love cologne! And why do you suppose he wants to give it to the poor people?"

Sam Layton chuckled.

"Don't you see, this isn't for the poor folks,"

he explained. "Twaddles said it was for the 'Charity Bureau'—the poor kid has the bureau idea in his mind in spite of what your father told him. Pretty nice of him to give away his own cologne, though, isn't it?"

Nora had told Sam how Father Blossom had tried to explain what the Charity Bureau was to Twaddles the night before, and Meg and Bobby remembered, too. They laughed a little at poor Twaddles but it was at the idea of the cologne bottle to stand on the Charity Bureau, and not at the little boy himself.

"We won't make fun of him a bit, will we, Bobby?" said Meg, as the car stopped before the school. "Twaddles was as good as gold to give away his own bottle of cologne, and perhaps someone will like to have it."

CHAPTER II

THE THANK OFFERINGS

SAM helped carry the vegetables into the school and we'll leave him for a minute, "toting" as he called it, the potatoes and shiny apples up the walk, and introduce you to the Blossom children.

You may already know them and if you have met them before you'll remember that Meg and Bobby had other and longer names, although their best friends often forgot that Meg was named Margaret for her mother, and that Robert Hayward Blossom was Bobby's real name, the one he would use when he grew up and went in business with Father Blossom. The four-year-old twins, too, Dot and Twaddles, when they were old enough to go to school would be written down on the teacher's roll book as Dorothy Anna and Arthur Gifford Blossom. In case you do not know, we'll tell

you that these four children lived in the town of Oak Hill, with their father and mother, and with Norah who had lived with them for years, and with Sam Layton who lived over the garage and was right-hand man to Father Blossom.

The first book about the Blossoms describes the lovely summer they spent at Brookside Farm, visiting Aunt Polly, who was Mother Blossom's sister. The friends they made there and the fun they had are all told of in "Four Little Blossoms at Brookside Farm." The children would have been sorry to leave Aunt Polly and the farm if there had not been other exciting days to look forward to. Meg and Bobby had to go to school, of course, and their first winter in the school room, and the persistent efforts of Dot and Twaddles to go to school, too, though they were not old enough to be enrolled in any class, and their final success, is related in the second volume called, "Four Little Blossoms at Oak Hill School." The third book about the Blossoms tells of the blue turquoise locket Meg lost and how it was found, and how even Meg and Bobby themselves were lost, though they

were also found. The children had some exciting days in this book, "Four Little Blossoms and Their Winter Fun," but all the excitement ended happily.

As soon as school closed in the spring, away went the Blossom family for a good time. What happened to them is told in the fourth book called, "Four Little Blossoms on Apple Tree Island." Living on an island is great fun and the little Blossoms enjoyed every day of the long summer. It did seem as though they were always finding something, and they helped to find a whole missing family while they were on Apple Tree Island and also helped to rescue a girl and two younger children who were "lost" on another island. They found a great friend in Captain Jenks who ran the motor boat, and they might have stayed happily on the island the whole year round if the same important business that had brought them home from Brookside Farm the summer before had not called them back to Oak Hill the middle of September. School opened, you see.

Back came the Blossom family and Norah

was very glad to see them. So was Sam Layton, who had been working on a farm in Canada during the summer, and had taken Philip, Meg's dog, with him. Sam had had enough of Canada, he said, and he liked Oak Hill much better; he had found no one in Canada, he declared, who could cook like Norah.

Between going to school and playing after school and taking care of Philip and Annabel Lee, the cat, and running errands and going with Father Blossom for rides in the car, the days passed swiftly and, almost before they realized it, Thanksgiving Day was just around the corner. And at Thanksgiving time, the children in school were asked to bring donations of food which were taken in charge by the Charity Bureau and by them given to people who otherwise might not have any dinner on the holiday.

And now that you know all about the four little Blossoms, we'll go back to where we left Sam carrying the potatoes and apples into the school.

"Is that all?" he asked, when he had cleared

the back seat of the boxes and bundles. "All right, then, I must go right back for your father. Don't forget to see that the Bureau gets the cologne, Meg," and he grinned.

Sam drove off in the car and Meg and Bobby ran down the stone steps into the basement of the school where the thank-offerings were to be stored. Once it had been the custom of the school to arrange everything in neat rows on the platform in the assembly hall, but after a handsome pyramid of apples had shifted during the opening prayer and had bumped—one at a time—down over the edge of the platform and into the aisles and, another time, a jar of preserves had burst and stained the green velvet carpet, it was wisely decided that everything should be carried into the basement and kept there.

"Oh, look at all the stuff!" cried Bobby when he saw the collection of gifts spread out on the plain wooden tables which were used for lunch tables on the days when it was too stormy to go home at noon. "Look, Meg, someone even brought a turkey!"

Sure enough, there was a fat turkey, neatly folded into a basket lined with orange crepe paper. One of the pupils who lived on a farm had brought him as her thank-offering and if the fortunate family who found that turkey in their basket Thanksgiving Eve admired the gift as much as the boys and girls of Oak Hill school did, there could have been no doubt of their thankfulness.

Mr. Carter, the principal of the grammar and primary grades, and Miss Wright, the vice-principal of the primary school, were busy taking the things the children brought and finding places for them on the tables.

"What fine, clean potatoes!" said Miss Wright, smiling at Meg. "You scrubbed those well, didn't you, dear? I'm so glad when the children take special pains to make their gifts attractive, for I believe the pleasure is doubled for the giver and the receiver. What is that in your hand, Meg? Something for the thank-offering?"

Meg had forgotten Twaddles' bottle of cologne which she held tightly in her hand.

"My little brother, Twaddles, sent it," she explained shyly, blushing a little. "It's—it's cologne, and he meant it for the Charity Bureau. He's only four years old and he doesn't understand about the Bureau very well."

Mr. Carter laughed and so did Miss Wright, and the children who were listening giggled. But in a moment Mr. Carter put out his hand.

"Let me take it, Meg," he said gently. "I know just the place for it. One of the Bureau workers told me yesterday about a poor old lady who has no one to love and take care of her. She sits all day long in a ward with seven other old ladies and we are going to make up a special little basket for her because she is ill. It will be a pretty basket with a little tea and candy and other dainties old ladies like in it and on the very top we'll put Twaddles' bottle of cologne. How will that be?"

"And I'll put a bow of cheerful red ribbon on it," promised Miss Wright. "Be sure and tell Twaddles, Meg, that we think it was lovely of him to send such a gift."

"He'll be—he'll be *thankful!*" stammered

Meg and then Mr. Carter and Miss Wright and the children laughed again, but as the principal said, proper laughing was good for them all.

"Now upstairs with you, every one," he said presently, when everything was in order, "the assembly bell will ring in five minutes and we don't want any stragglers. Tim Roon, put that apple back; I'm surprised I should have to speak to anyone about touching the gifts meant for the poor and sick."

Tim Roon, a boy in Bobby's room, though two or three years older than Bobby who was seven and a half, tossed the apple he had taken from the table angrily back and it fell to the floor and rolled under the table. Bobby crawled under and brought it out and dusted it off carefully with his clean handkerchief. Then he put it with the other apples and went upstairs with Meg who had waited for him.

"Won't Twaddles be glad about the cologne?" said Meg happily. "I do think Mr. Carter is just as nice!"

"Yes, he is," agreed Bobby, "and you could see he remembers Twaddles. So does Miss

Wright. Well, I'll see you at recess, Meg."

Twaddles and Dot had paid a visit to the school the term before and it was not likely that anyone who had met the twins would ever forget them. Mr. Carter did not and neither did Miss Wright. As for Miss Mason, who had taught Bobby and Meg last year and in whose class Meg was this term, she was always asking about Twaddles and Dot, and she declared she quite looked forward to the time when they should be old enough to come to school.

Meg missed Bobby very much and often wished that they could go through school in the same grade. But he was a class ahead of her and they saw each other only at recess, once the school day had started. This morning, as soon as the recess gong sounded, a stream of children headed for the basement to inspect the thank-offerings again.

"What's that, Edward?" Bobby asked a fat little boy who had dashed to the basement door and came back lugging something yellow and round. "What's that for?"

Edward Kurler was in Meg's class. He was

a good-natured, not particularly quick child, and very ready to do whatever anyone else suggested. When he played "tag" with the other boys, Edward was apt to be "it" the greater part of the game; but he was so good-natured he never was known to be cross about it.

"I brought a pumpkin," he explained, his own face as round and shiny as the pumpkin he carried. "I didn't have time to bring it in 'fore school opened. I guess the poor folks will like a pumpkin—they can make pies out of it."

Tim Roon came up to the pumpkin and looked at it closely.

"Why, it's a jack-o-lantern!" he said in surprise.

"Yes, it is," nodded Edward. "I had it left over from Hallowe'en. My uncle made it for me."

"But you haven't any candle in it," said Tim. "I never heard of a pumpkin lantern without a candle, did you, Charlie?"

Charlie Black was Tim Roon's chum and the two boys usually helped each other when they planned any mischief.

"No, I never heard of a pumpkin without a candle," said Charlie seriously. "And I don't think you ought to give one away 'less you have a candle for it, Edward."

Bobby and Meg leaned up against the table and stared at Edward anxiously. They knew a candle should go inside a pumpkin lantern, too. The other pupils began to think Edward had made a mistake and that his thank-offering had something very wrong with it. Edward felt that way himself.

"I'll lend you a candle, if you like," offered Tim Roon. "Of course I'll have to have it back, but you can have it till school closes."

"Oh, give it to him," said Charlie Black. "Light it for him and let's see how the lantern looks. Maybe it isn't a good lantern."

"All right, I will," agreed Tim, his black eyes snapping with naughtiness. "Wait a minute, Edward, and I'll show you how to do things right."

Mr. Carter had gone over to the grammar school to see how their thank-offerings were coming in, and Miss Wright was busy in her

office. There was no one in the basement to stop Tim Roon as he pulled what looked like a red candle from his pocket and fitted it in the hollow pumpkin. He stood the lantern in the center of a pile of apples and took a match from his pocket. None of the boys were allowed to carry matches and they looked at him in surprise.

"Now I'll light it for you," said Tim, touching the match to the candle he had placed inside.

Meg leaned forward to watch and her pretty hair was almost touching the pumpkin when Bobby shouted, "Look out!" and pulled her back.

Then with a loud noise the pumpkin blew into many pieces, scattering in all directions and sending the apples rolling to the floor!

CHAPTER III

FOUR GRATEFUL CHILDREN

JUST as the pumpkin burst, two things happened; Mr. Carter stepped inside the door and the gong rang to announce the end of recess.

Tim Roon shot for the door and the children followed. Tim was eager to escape the principal and the others did not want to be late in returning to their classrooms. But Mr. Carter stood in the doorway and did not move to let them pass.

"What was that noise I heard just now?" he asked. "It sounded like an explosion."

No one answered and Mr. Carter turned to Miss Wright who had come downstairs to see why so many pupils were absent from their rooms.

"Say to the teachers, please," he said, "that I

am detaining the children; they will come up presently."

"Oh, dear!" whispered Meg to Bobby, "now he's going to scold."

The principal heard her and he smiled a little.

"Not scold, Meg, unless someone deserves it," he said pleasantly. "What was that noise I heard?"

"The pumpkin blew up," replied Meg uncomfortably."

"The pumpkin blew up!" repeated Mr. Carter in astonishment. "Whose pumpkin? What made it blow up?"

Meg was silent.

"Bobby," said Mr. Carter, "was it your pumpkin?"

"No, sir," answered Bobby.

"Please, Mr. Carter," said Edward bravely. "It was my pumpkin. I brought it for the poor people. But it was only a hollow one."

"Well, why did you want to blow it up?" asked Mr. Carter, puzzled. "And what did you do to it to make it blow up, Edward?"

"I didn't do anything to it," protested Edward.

"I want to know and I want to know at once, what caused that pumpkin to explode," said the principal sternly and Tim Roon wished suddenly that he had had nothing to do with it. "Edward!"

"Yes, sir?" poor Edward replied faintly.

"What made your pumpkin explode?" asked Mr. Carter.

"A candle," said Edward, who really believed that Tim Roon had put a candle in his pumpkin. "They said a hollow pumpkin had to have a candle in it."

"Nonsense," declared Mr. Carter. "No candle ever exploded. Who put the candle in your pumpkin?"

Bobby thought "telling tales" under any circumstances, the most dreadful thing anyone could do. He did hope that Edward would not give Tim away. Tim had the same hope, but he did not trust the fat boy. Instead, he leaned against him and pinched him.

"You know what will happen to you, if you tell," he whispered warningly.

"Ouch!" cried Edward, but the principal's sharp eyes had seen Tim.

"So you're the culprit, Tim," he said severely. "I might have known. What did you put in the pumpkin? Tell me the truth."

"A firecracker," replied Tim sullenly.

"Did you light it?" persisted Mr. Carter.

Tim nodded. He knew what was coming.

"Very well," said the principal. "I will wait for you, Tim, while you put the scattered apples back as you found them and carry out the pieces of pumpkin. Then you and I will go up to the office and have a little talk. I think your father will be surprised to hear that you are carrying matches in your pocket. You may go back to your rooms, children, and please go quietly."

It was all very well to tell then to go quietly, but such a buzzing of tongues as sounded in the halls and corridors as the boys and girls went upstairs! They talked about how frightened they had been when the pumpkin ex-

ploded and they talked about what might happen to Tim and they wondered what made him think of lighting a firecracker and how Mr. Carter had happened to come just in time to hear the noise of the explosion.

"I think it was a silly thing to do," said Bobby indignantly. "Meg was so close to that pumpkin her hair would have been burned if I hadn't pulled her back. And now Edward hasn't even a jack-o-lantern to give the poor people."

School closed at one o'clock that day because the next day was Thanksgiving, and of course as soon as Meg and Bobby reached home the twins demanded to know about the thank-offerings. Twaddles was delighted to hear about his bottle of cologne and he said that he was sure it would look nice on the Bureau. As Meg observed, there was no use in trying to explain that again to him, so she didn't try.

When they told of the pumpkin Edward Kurler had brought and of the trouble Tim Roon had made for himself, Twaddles listened breathlessly, but Dot turned up her small nose.

"Huh!" she said scornfully. "I think Ed-

ward is a very queer boy. Nobody could eat a hollow pumpkin, could they, Norah?"

"Not a very hollow one," admitted Norah, "but neither can I make tarts from a hollow bowl, Dot. If you don't stop 'tasting' pretty soon, we'll have no tarts for tomorrow."

The four little Blossoms were in the kitchen, helping Norah who was very busy getting ready for the Thanksgiving Day dinner. Bobby and Meg had found the twins hovering around the kitchen table when they came home from school and they had had their lunch in the kitchen, for Mother Blossom was in the city for the day and Father Blossom seldom came home to lunch.

"And now we'll help you," said Meg, as soon as they had finished lunch. So Norah had four helpers for the rest of the afternoon.

"I'd as lief have four whistling winds to help me rake leaves," said Sam, coming in for a drink of water and finding Norah surrounded by willing hands and exceedingly willing little mouths. "But then, 'pears to me you are managing to turn out some work, Norah," and Sam helped himself to a couple of sugar cookies from

a golden-brown pile left to cool on a clean cloth.

"You're as bad as the children," sighed Norah, but she gave Sam two more cookies before she told him to "be off."

"Sam says he's thankful it hasn't snowed yet," reported Meg at the dinner table that night. "He says he wants to finish painting the garage roof before it snows."

"What are you thankful for, Meg?" asked Father Blossom suddenly.

"Tarts!" cried Dot, before Meg could answer, managing to tip her glass of milk into her lap.

"Dot, you must learn to be more careful," said Mother Blossom. "I suppose I ought to be thankful it wasn't cocoa you upset. And you answered when Daddy was speaking to Meg."

"I can't think in a hurry," apologized Meg, while Dot was being mopped up with a clean napkin. "Could you wait a minute, Daddy?"

"I'll ask you again tomorrow morning," said Father Blossom. "I'll expect each one of you to be able to tell me then why you are thankful. Think it over carefully and then you'll be ready."

"Why am I thankful?" said Meg to herself,

over and over that evening till bedtime came. "Why am I thankful, I wonder?"

"Oh, Daddy!" Bobby called down over the banisters, after he was supposed to be in bed. "Daddy! Is it just the same to think why you are thankful and what you are thankful for?"

"Just about the same," answered Father Blossom. "If you think about what you are thankful *for* you'll soon know *why* you are thankful. Do you understand?"

"I—I guess so," said Bobby doubtfully and he went back to bed.

In the morning the four little Blossoms found a chocolate turkey at each plate and Mother Blossom explained that they were a present from Daddy.

"Well, who can tell me for what they're thankful?" asked Father Blossom, as Norah brought in the oatmeal.

"I know, Daddy!" cried Twaddles. "I'm thankful I found Bobby's knife."

"You found my knife?" said Bobby, frowning. "You found my knife? Why, my knife

isn't lost—I left in the top drawer of my desk in my room."

"Yes, I know you did," admitted Twaddles, "and I borrowed it to whittle a new mast for my boat and I couldn't remember where I left it. But Norah found it on the back stoop," concluded Twaddles cheerfully.

"If you don't leave my things alone!" began Bobby wrathfully. "I'll—I'll——"

"Now we won't have any quarrels Thanksgiving morning," said Father Blossom quietly. "Bobby, suppose you tell me what you are thankful for."

"For turkey," said Bobby promptly, forgetting to be angry at Twaddles as he remembered the plump bird he had seen hanging in the "cold room" where Norah kept her food supplies and the refrigerator.

"I'm thankful for the maple sugar Aunt Polly sent us," cried Dot. "You said we could have a piece after breakfast, Mother."

"Meg?" asked Father Blossom. "What are you thinking of, dear?"

Meg raised her blue eyes and smiled sunnily.

"I'm thankful Mr. and Mrs. Harley and Dick and Herbert found each other," she said simply.

Meg, you see, remembered the Harleys who had once lived on Apple Tree Island and the trouble and sorrow they had known when the family was separated.

"I think we're all thankful for the Harleys," said Mother Blossom, "and I'm thankful for my whole Blossom family this morning!"

Thanksgiving dinner was to be at one o'clock and little Miss Florence, the dressmaker, was coming, and Mrs. Jordan and her lame son Paul, for whom the four little Blossoms had once given a fair.

"If we can't have Aunt Polly, or any of the dear farm folk, at least we can make a happy day for someone else," Mother Blossom had said, when she sent Bobby to invite Miss Florence and Mrs. Jordan.

"And after dinner, I'll take everyone for a ride," promised Father Blossom, "that is, if it doesn't snow."

So the four children spent their morning between the kitchen, where Norah and Mother

Blossom were cooking the most delicious smelling things to eat, and the garage, where Father Blossom and Sam were going over the car to make sure that it would be in good order for the drive that afternoon.

"It's my turn to sit up with you, isn't it, Sam?" asked Dot eagerly. "You always take Meg, but it is my turn, really it is."

"Your father is going to drive," replied Sam to this. "I'm going to lend Norah a hand with all the dinner dishes. You can argue with him about riding on the front seat, Dot."

Though Father Blossom had bought the car the spring before, the four little Blossoms still argued about whose turn it was to ride with the driver nearly every time they went for a ride. They had a system of "taking turns," but this did not always prevent friction because sometimes the twins both squeezed into the front seat and then neither one was willing to admit that "counted." As a rule, though, they settled the dispute amiably and without any suggestion from Sam or Father Blosom.

"Mother says we must come in and put on our

best dresses, Dot," said Meg, coming back to the garage from a trip to the kitchen. "The table is all set and it's most time for the company to come."

"All right, I'm coming," Dot answered, brushing past Father Blossom who was washing his hands at the lavatory in one corner of the garage.

"Wait a minute, Dot," he said, catching hold of her blouse. "What on earth have you in your pockets, child?"

CHAPTER IV

DRIVING WITH DADDY

DOT wore a blue serge sailor suit and she had four pockets, two in the skirt and two in the blouse, and in addition there were two pockets in the blue reefer coat she wore. Apparently all six pockets were stuffed full of something.

"Mother said you shouldn't put things in the pockets of your cloth dress," Meg told her little sister. "They get stuck up and gummy and she can't clean them."

"Well, I thought I was going to wear this dress all day," explained Dot, looking earnestly at Father Blossom, "so I wanted some raisins in case anyone was hungry while we're out driving this afternoon."

Dot showed them her coat pockets stuffed with raisins, packed in so tightly that they made two hard lumps. It was these hard lumps Father

Blossom had felt when she brushed past him.

"What's that in your blouse?" asked Bobby.

"My choc'late turkey," said Dot. Alas, the chocolate had melted and the turkey was now sadly mixed with blue serge and red flannel.

"What's in the other pocket?" suggested Twaddles.

Dot looked a little confused.

"Cookies," she said. "I thought Norah wouldn't mind. I only took three."

"And both her skirt pockets are stuffed full of nuts!" announced Meg, who had been examining them. "Salted nuts. I'll bet you didn't ask Mother if you could have them, either."

"Well, I was going to afterward," said Dot, half crying. "I didn't eat a single thing. I was saving them for folks to have this afternoon. So there!"

"Run along in and get ready for dinner," directed Father Blossom, trying not to look at Sam, lest he laugh. "Next time, ask Mother, Dot; you are old enough to know you mustn't help yourself to food without asking."

Mother Blossom sighed a little over the

stuffed pockets, for Dot's dresses seemed to be always in need of cleaning and repairing. But she said that she knew her little girl had not meant to be careless and that no one should be scolded on Thanksgiving Day.

"And I don't believe even you will be hungry after you eat the dinner Norah has for us," said Mother Blossom smiling as she tied Dot's pretty new red hair-ribbon on the thick dark hair. "There is the bell—suppose you run down, Dot, and that will save Norah a trip to the door."

Dot, looking very neat and pretty in her red and white dotted challis dress, danced downstairs to let Miss Florence in. Dot had such dark hair and eyes that all shades of red just suited her. Meg's frock was blue and white challis and her hair-ribbon matched her blue eyes.

By the time old Mrs. Jordan and the lame Paul had arrived and had warmed their cold hands at the blazing wood fire in the living-room, Norah said dinner was ready. And such a dinner as it was! Aunt Polly had sent the turkey from Brookside Farm and most of the

vegetables, too! And the currant jelly was the reddest you ever saw, and certainly the pumpkin pie was the yellowest! Pale little Miss Florence, who sewed all day long, day after day, week after week, for the people in Oak Hill and who had no family of her own to love her, said she had never tasted such delicious stuffing as came out of the big brown turkey, and as for Mrs. Jordan and Paul they ate as though a good dinner was a solemn and important affair, and perhaps it was to them.

"It isn't snowing, is it, Daddy?" said Twaddles, the moment dinner was over.

"No, I shouldn't say it was actually snowing," answered Father Blossom teasingly, "but it looks very much to me as though it might snow. The paper said snow today and those clouds are pretty heavy."

"But you said if it didn't snow, you'd take us," urged Bobby. "Didn't he, Meg?"

"Yes," nodded Meg. "Yes, you did, Daddy."

"Then I must keep my word," said Father Blossom gravely. "Mother, have you enough wraps to keep us all warm?"

Mother Blossom had brought down heavy coats and robes and blankets early that morning, and now she and Norah began to wrap up the guests to make them comfortable for the drive. Father Blossom's car was big and roomy, with side curtains that could be put up in case of a storm, but it was not a closed car. All the Blossoms were fond of plenty of fresh air and they liked to be warmly bundled up and then to ride through the wind and cold and come home with rosy cheeks and bright eyes and, goodness, such appetites!

Sam brought the car around and first Mrs. Jordan was helped in, then Paul next to her, and then little Miss Florence who, as Father Blossom said, hardly took up any room at all. Mother Blossom took one of the folding seats and Meg the other. Meg wanted very much to sit next to her father, but she was little woman enough not to tease when she knew there were others to be considered. Mother Blossom had explained to the children that this ride was really to give pleasure to Miss Florence and

Mrs. Jordan and Paul, who seldom enjoyed an automobile trip.

"Tuck Dot away in there with you, Mother," said Father Blossom, lifting that small girl in, "and I'll take the boys with me. Then coming home, Dot may changes places with Twaddles, if she likes."

Finally everyone was nicely packed in and away they went, leaving Sam and Norah to talk over the dinner and eat their own and wash the dishes and put them away.

"Don't forget to feed Philip and Annabel Lee," cried Meg, and Sam shouted back that he would see to "Fill-Up." This was Sam's name for the dog and although Meg did not like it she was used to it by this time.

"Did you bring anything to eat, Dot?" asked Bobby, mischievously, twisting in his seat to speak to his small sister. Dot was almost buried under the wraps and blankets in the tonneau.

"No, I didn't," she said indignantly. "I meant to bring my turkey, but he's stuck to my serge dress."

"Daddy!" cried Twaddles suddenly. "Oh, Daddy, I dropped Bobby's knife!"

Twaddles never went out in the car that he didn't drop something. His family were used to his habit and sometimes Father Blossom stopped the car and sometimes he didn't. It depended on what Twaddles dropped. This time Father Blossom knew he could not have dropped anything in the road because he was safely tucked in between Bobby and himself.

"Daddy, make Twaddles leave my knife alone!" said Bobby. "He never even asks me if he can have it and he's always losing it. It's my knife."

"I'll get down and pick it up for you," offered Twaddles generously.

"You leave it alone!" cried Bobby furiously. "I'll get it myself, and if you ever touch it again——" Bobby didn't say what would happen, but from the frown on his face Twaddles was left to guess that it would be mighty serious.

However, Twaddles had a will of his own and he began to wriggle, intending to slip down to the floor and recover the knife. Bobby flung

his arm around him to hold him and then, as Twaddles kicked, Bobby began to kick, too.

"Children!" said Mother Blossom in warning, but she was too late.

Father Blossom stopped the car.

"Meg and Dot, change places with Bobby and Twaddles," he said very quietly. "Hurry, please, and don't keep us waiting."

Sam Layton often threatened to make them change places when they argued, but this was the first time it had ever really happened to them. Poor Bobby and Twaddles got slowly down and Meg and Dot crawled out and up on the front seat with Father Blossom. Then, when the robes and blankets were all fixed again, they drove on. Bobby and Twaddles were very quiet for half an hour and Meg and Dot did not talk much, either. Father and Mother Blossom and the guests had the conversation all to themselves.

"Ralph!" said Mother Blossom, when they had driven several miles, "Ralph, I do believe it is beginning to snow."

"I thought so myself a few minutes ago,"

answered Father Blossom. "I'll go on to the next cross-roads and turn. We can be home before it storms heavily."

But the white flakes began to come faster and faster and the road was white when they reached the cross-road. Father Blossom turned the car and they started back to Oak Hill. Dot was half asleep, though she would have been much aggrieved if anyone had said so, when Meg said excitedly that she saw something in the road.

"Look, Daddy, over under that bush!" she insisted. "Let me get out and see. Oh, maybe it's lost in this snowstorm!"

"Let Bobby go, Daughter," said Father Blossom stopping the car. "Bobby, don't you want to run over and see what that is under the bush?"

Bobby was very glad to go and he was out in a minute and running across the road.

"It's a dog, Daddy," he shouted. "A little white dog. And he is so cold!"

"Bring him here and we'll take care of him," said Father Blossom, smiling at Meg who was nearly jumping up and down with anxiety.

"Trust Meg to see an animal in trouble. I never should have noticed that bit of fluff under the bush. Why, he's almost the color of the snow!"

The little white dog Bobby brought back in his arms was so tiny and so soft and silky that he might easily have been overlooked in a snowstorm. He was evidently lost and had crawled under the bush in an effort to keep warm. Meg held him on her lap and put her muff over him to keep the cold air off.

"He has a silver collar on," she reported, "but I can't read it. Can you, Bobby?"

Bobby leaned over the back of the seat and looked at the collar.

"M-A-T-S-I-E," he spelled out slowly. "What a funny name. But there's some more—C-L-I-F-T-O-N P-A-R-K."

"Why, Clifton Park is thirty miles from here," said Father Blossom in surprise. "The poor dog never could have come that distance. I wonder——"

Before he could say what he wondered, a handsome shining limousine, coming down the

road slowly from the other direction, stopped. The chauffeur held up his hand.

"Have you seen anything of a dog?" he asked anxiously. "A little white dog, with a silver collar?"

And maybe that chauffeur wasn't surprised when four children shouted at him, "Is the dog's name 'Matsie'?"

"Yes, we found such a dog," said Father Blossom, smiling. "Back about forty rods, under a bush. He was pretty cold, but he seems to be all right."

The chauffeur came over and took the dog Meg held out to him.

"I'm much obliged to you," he said awkwardly. "It would cost me my job if I went home and told 'em I'd lost Matsie; that dog's worth a thousand dollars and took first prize at the last dog show. Mrs. Hemming thinks a heap of him."

"Well, it is easy to lose a small animal like that," said Father Blossom. "Don't you think you'd beter shut him up in a safe place till you get home?"

"You bet I will," grinned the chauffeur. "I guess Matsie dropped out when I went into a rut back there; the rest of the trip he rides down under the seat tied fast."

He thanked the Blossoms again for finding the dog for him and went back to his car, and Father Blossom continued the journey toward home. Twaddles, who had been remarkably silent the whole trip, spoke just as they were coming into Oak Hill.

"Well, I never dropped a dog out of the car, did I?" he said seriously, and Mother Blossom kissed him and said no, he never had.

"But you've dropped about everything else," declared Bobby gloomily.

CHAPTER V

THE FOOTBALL GAME

FATHER BLOSSOM drove Mrs. Jordan and Paul home and left Miss Florence at her house. They all said it had been the happiest Thanksgiving they had known in years and the four little Blossoms were happy, too.

"I like to have company come to our house," said Meg, as she was going to bed that night. "Don't you, Dot?"

"Yes, I do," replied Dot sleepily. "I'm thankful for company."

The next day there was no school, of course, and though Bobby had planned to play with Meg and the twins, two boys came to ask him to play football before he was through breakfast.

"Fred Baldwin has a football, Mother," said Bobby earnestly. "And we're getting up a foot-

ball team. Do you care if I go over to his house and play?"

"Let me be on the team?" begged Twaddles. "I can play football, Bobby. Can't I, Dot?"

"You're too little," answered Bobby impatiently. "Fred is waiting to know if I can come, Mother."

"But, dear, I don't see where you are going to play," protested Mother Blossom. "You can't play on the school field, because the older boys have that for their use."

"They're all through playing football now," explained Bobby. "The last game was Thanksgiving. There's a vacant lot back of Fred's house, Mother, and we can play there. I'm the captain."

"All right, dear, run along and have a good time," said Mother Blossom, giving him a kiss. "Be sure you come home at twelve o'clock. And, Twaddles, I'll think of something nice for you to do at home. When you are as old as Bobby, you may play football, too."

Fred Baldwin and Palmer Davis, two boys in

Bobby's class at school, were waiting for him. Fred had his football under his arm.

"We're going over to Bertrand Ashe's," Fred explained. "His cousin is visiting him over Thankgiving and his brother is captain of the football team at the State University. So he ought to be a good player."

Bobby thought a boy who was fortunate enough to have a brother captain of a University team ought to be a good player, too, and he did not wonder that Fred had decided to play in Bertrand's yard.

"Hello," said Bertrand, when he saw the three boys. "This is my cousin, Elmer Lambert."

"Hello," said Elmer, a tall thin boy with a freckled face and nice, merry blue eyes. "I see you have a football."

Fred was proud of his football. It was a present from his grandfather, he explained. In five minutes the boys were lined up ready for a game. Of course they knew a real football team needs eleven players, but as Bertrand sensibly said there wasn't room for eleven in the

yard anyway and they could get alone with five.

But from the start the game didn't go smoothly. Bobby kicked the ball over the fence and then, when he had climbed after it and brought it back, Fred kicked it over the fence on the other side.

"There isn't room enough here," complained Elmer. "Can't we play somewhere else, Bertrand?"

"Back of the carpenter shop, across the street," suggested Bertrand. "The shop's built on the edge of the street and there's an open place in back. Come on, I'll show you."

The snowstorm which had begun so briskly the afternoon before when the four little Blossoms were out automobiling had not amounted to much after all. It had melted during the night and though there was a sharp wind and it was cold, the ground was almost bare.

The carpenter shop "on the edge of the street," was a one-story building on the street end of a long, narrow lot that stretched through to the next block. There was no one around when the boys went around back of the shop and it seemed

to be locked up securely. Bertrand said he thought the man who owned the shop had gone away to spend Thanksgiving with his son in another town.

"Will he mind if we play here?" asked Elmer.

"He won't care a bit," replied Bertrand confidently. "We won't hurt anything, and besides he won't know about it."

Which wasn't a very good argument and would have made Father Blossom laugh if he had heard it. But the boys were too eager to resume their game to pay much attention to anything Bertrand said.

Bobby, as captain, had his "signals" written down on a piece of paper and he first explained them to his players and then called off the numbers as he had seen the high school captain do. And when they had tried all the signals three times, Elmer suggested that they practice punting.

"That's very important," he explained, "and my brother says if you can develop a good punter on your team, half your troubles are settled. I think Bobby does pretty well now."

Bobby was very much pleased at this praise from a boy whose brother was a big football captain and he resolved, more firmly than ever, to make the football team the first year he was in high school.

"Punt now," urged Elmer. "Stand back, fellows, and give him a chance. Go on and try, Bobby."

Bobby took the ball from Fred, held it a moment in his hands and dropped it. Before it reached the ground he kicked and his toe sent it curving in a long line over the lot toward the carpenter shop.

"My goodness, it went in the window!" gasped Palmer Davis. "Bobby, you've kicked it into the carpenter shop!"

"How'll we get it out?" asked Fred anxiously. "All the doors are locked, the back one, too. I saw the padlocks. How'll we get my ball back?"

The five boys looked at each other anxiously. There was Fred's new, expensive football inside the locked shop. What would the carpenter say when he found it there and would he give it back?

"Do you know the man who owns the shop, Bertrand?" asked Elmer sensibly. "Is he cross?"

"Yes, he is," said Bertrand quickly. "He'll be mad anyway 'cause we've been playing here and I don't believe he'll give the ball back. He doesn't like boys much, ever since a gang used to play round his shop and steal pieces of wood and tin and solder. That's why he had the locks put on the doors; he used to have just bolts."

Bertrand had a memory like a great many other people. He remembered these small details after something had happened.

"Well, I didn't break a window," said Bobby hopefully. "The ball went through that little window that was left open; 'tisn't as if I had broken a window in his shop."

"That won't make any difference," said Bertrand gloomily. "I tell you he will be mad 'cause we played on his lot. I think we'd better go home before he comes and finds us here."

"I won't go without my ball," protested Fred. "It's brand-new and I want it. Bobby,

you have to ask the man for it, 'cause you kicked it through the window."

As they talked the boys had been walking slowly toward the carpenter shop, and now they stood directly under the open window. It was smaller than the three regular-sized windows which were closed—and presumably locked. Bobby could reach the sill of the small window with the tips of his fingers.

"I'm going in to get it," he said quietly to Fred. "You watch, and if you see the man coming sing out."

"Are you going in?" asked Fred, surprised. "Maybe you can't get out. Aren't you afraid, Bobby?"

Bobby considered. He was a very honest little boy.

"Yes, I'm afraid, kind of," he said truthfully. "But I'd be more afraid to go and ask the man for it. Be sure you yell if you see him coming."

He scrambled up to the window sill and the boys helped push him through the small opening. They heard him drop down to the floor and begin rummaging around.

"I don't see where it went," he cried. "Gee, there's a lot of things in here."

"Come on, I'm going in!" exclaimed Elmer. "It's mean to make Bobby do it all. We were all playing. I'm going to help him find the ball."

The rest of the boys followed Elmer's lead. One by one they scrambled up to the little window and squeezed through. Once inside, they found the shop so fascinating that they had to stop and look around before they began to search for the missing ball.

"What do you suppose this is?" cried Fred, pointing to a queer tool that lay on the workbench.

"I don't know—don't touch anything," said Bobby. "I wish I could see the ball. Oh, here's a cat!"

Sure enough, a sleek gray and white cat lay curled up on a coat in one corner of the room. She opened her eyes sleepily and stared at Bobby and when he patted her she purred gently.

"Here's the ball!" shouted Elmer Lambert.

"Look, it rolled under this basket. Pitch it out of the window, Fred, and then we'll go."

"But I want to see how this works," said Fred, who was examining a box that clamped to a block of steel. "Just wait a minute, can't you? I want to see if I can work it."

"All right, you wait and the carpenter man will come along and catch us," Bobby told him. "Then I guess you'll be sorry."

The mention of the carpenter was enough for Fred. He tossed his precious football out of the window and climbed after it, hastily followed by the other boys. All breathed a sigh of relief as they landed safely on the ground.

"H. Bennett," read Bobby, looking up at the sign which hung over the door. "Does Mr. H. Bennett own the shop, Bertrand?"

"Yes, he's the carpenter," replied Bertrand, "and he has men who go out and work for him. He lives up near the school."

"Oh, yes, I know that man," said Palmer.

Bobby thought it must be nearly twelve o'clock and when Bertrand ran into his house to look at the clock, he called back to the rest

that it was quarter of twelve. So they scattered to go home for lunch and there was of course no more football game.

Luncheon was ready when Bobby reached home and oddly enough he did not speak of the morning's experience. Mother Blossom asked him if the boys had played football, and Bobby answered yes, but he did not say anything about the game. Usually he liked to tell about his fun and the twins depended on their older brother to give them new ideas for playing.

"Sam says he's going over to Clayton, and he'll come home by the foundry and get Daddy and if you say so we may go with him," cried Meg, running in from the garage where she had taken Annabel Lee and Philip their dinners. "Please, Mother, you want us to go, don't you?"

"Oh, Mother, let us!" cried the twins.

"I suppose as it is holiday time and you may not have the opportunity again soon, you'll have to go," said Mother Blossom. "Be sure you wear your sweaters under your coats, and don't bother Sam with too many questions and too much chatter."

"Oh, goody!" cried the twins, and the children all clattered out of the room to prepare for their trip.

The four little Blossoms had their drive to Clayton and came home with Father Blossom just in time for dinner. The long ride in the cold air made them sleepy and they were glad to go to bed earlier than usual.

In the middle of the night, when it was dark and still and very cold, something woke Bobby. He sat up in bed and listened, then snuggled down under the blankets, for a chilly wind blew in at the window.

"Fire engines," he whispered, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER VI

BOBBY HEARS BAD NEWS

"ANOTHER cup of coffee, please, Norah," said Father Blossom.

It was breakfast time, and the four little Blossoms had each made a separate trip to the door and back, before taking seats at the table, to see if it "wasn't going to snow." Father Blossom had finally said that no one was to open the door again and that he would like to eat breakfast once with his family when he did not feel that he had to hurry.

"Aren't you going directly to the foundry, then?" asked Mother Blossom, sugaring Dot's oatmeal for her.

"No, I have an errand in town first," replied Father Blossom. "By the way, Sam tells me a carpenter shop burned down last night."

"Mr. H. Bennett's carpenter shop?" asked Bobby in surprise. Then he flushed a bright red.

"Why, yes, it was Bennett's," said Father Blossom, glancing curiously at Bobby. "What do you know about the place, Son?"

"Nothing much," muttered Bobby. "It's over by Bertrand's house."

"Was it much of a loss, dear?" asked Mother Blossom.

"I believe it was," replied Father Blossom, and Bobby listened eagerly. "Several hundred dollars' worth of valuable tools and some building plans and considerable cabinet work was destroyed, Sam says. The only thing saved was a cat."

It was on the tip of Bobby's tongue to add, "a gray and white one," but he stopped himself just in time.

"There's Fred Baldwin whistling for me," he said instead. "He wants me to come and play. May I be excused, Mother?"

"Mother, Bobby never plays with us any more," complained Twaddles. "He ought to stay in our yard some, don't you think? All he cares about now is playing football."

"I don't mind the football," said Mother

Blossom smiling. "But I do wish the boys wouldn't come and whistle outside the house when we are eating, Bobby. I like you to stay at the table till a meal is properly finished."

"Well, I will next time," promised Bobby, throwing his arms about her and giving her a hug.

The twins took the opportunity to help themselves to marmalade and when the scandalized Norah and Meg drew attention to the mountain of sweet stuff on the two plates, Bobby ran off while Twaddles and Dot were loudly protesting that they had only taken a "tiny bit."

"Hello, Bobby!" said Fred, as Bobby came running down the path. "Say, did you know the carpenter shop burned down last night?"

"Daddy told me," replied Bobby. "I thought I heard fire engines when I woke up. It's lucky they saved the cat."

The boys were walking up the street and now Fred turned and looked at Bobby.

"Mr. Bennett thinks we set it on fire," he said in a low tone, and glancing over his shoulder as though he expected to see the owner of the car-

penter shop behind him. "He heard we were in his shop yesterday."

"Well, suppose we were—we didn't set it on fire!" said Bobby crossly. He was cross because he was worried. It is not very pleasant to be told that some one suspects you of setting his shop on fire.

"No, of course we didn't," agreed Fred. "But you know Bertrand says Mr. Bennett doesn't like boys, and I suppose if he had caught us in there he would have been awfully mad. And now he knows we were in there, he's sure we did it."

"Who told him we were in his shop?" asked Bobby suddenly.

"Bertrand says some of the neighbors saw us climb in," explained Fred. "Bertrand's over at my house now, waiting for us. He told me. And Palmer Davis is there, too, and Elmer Lambert."

Bobby and Fred found the other three boys in Fred's yard. They looked serious and no one suggested football. Evidently Bertrand had been telling them more about Mr. Bennett.

"He's so mad," reported Bertrand when he saw Fred and Bobby, "he's so mad, I don't dare go on that side of the street. I saw it burning last night—everybody on our street woke up when the engines came. And a solid mahogany china closet he was carving was burned, and my father says he never had any insurance."

"But we didn't burn his shop," argued Bobby. "Look how long ago we were in there—yesterday morning and it never burned down till late at night. Doesn't that show we didn't do it?"

"Well, Mr. Bennett says maybe we tipped over oil or varnish or something and it took a long time to soak into the wood and then it caught fire from the stove he had in the corner," explained Bertrand.

"Did he tell you that?" demanded Bobby.

"Oh, my no!" said Bertrand, looking frightened at the idea. "He never said a word to me; I wouldn't go near him. But the man that tends our furnace heard him and he told me. And he says Mr. Bennett has all our names and he is going to see our fathers!"

The boys stared at each other. This was dreadful! Only Elmer Lambert smiled.

"I'm going home this afternoon," he said. "Gee, I'm sorry for the rest of you."

"I'm going to tell my father right away!" cried Bobby. "I'll go out to the foundry before he comes home to lunch. He comes home at noon, Saturdays."

But Fred Baldwin sprang up angrily.

"Don't you dare!" he said excitedly, shaking his fist at Bobby. "Don't you dare tell your father! He'd call up my father and then I'd catch it. My father will be mad if he hears I went into the old carpenter shop when the door was locked. That was all your fault, Bobby—we wouldn't have gone in if you hadn't."

"Well, he went after your ball," said Elmer reasonably. "And I guess your father will know you were in the shop if Mr. Bennett tells him about it, won't he?"

"Perhaps he won't tell him," said the hopeful Fred. "He may forget all about it, or find out who really did set the shop on fire. But any-

one who tells first is mean, because my father will scold like anything."

So Bobby promised not to tell his father and the other boys promised to keep silent, too.

"There's no use in making trouble," declared Fred when the noon whistles blew and his friends started for their homes. "Perhaps Mr. Bennett won't say a thing, and then think how silly we'd feel."

But Bobby, while he may not have felt silly, certainly was feeling far from comfortable as he walked home. And when he reached home and saw the car in the garage, which meant that Father Blossom was home earlier than usual, he wished that it was not Saturday. If it had been, say, Tuesday, his father would not have come home to lunch.

"Now, Bobby, I want you to stay in the house this afternoon and play," said Mother Blossom cheerfully. "You haven't been in the house hardly an hour since the holiday began. You and Meg think of something you want to do, and if Dot and Twaddles can play it, too, that will be lovely. Your father and I are going

over accounts and we want to have a few hours of quiet."

"Oh, dear, he isn't even going anywhere," thought poor Bobby, toiling upstairs after Meg and the noisy twins who were headed for the playroom. He had been hoping, during lunch, that Father Blossom would go for a drive in the car and perhaps take Mother Blossom with him.

"What ails you, Bobby?" asked Meg when they reached the third floor front room, given over to the four little Blossoms as a winter place to play. "I've asked you twice what you want to do and you don't say anything."

"There's the doorbell," said Bobby, running into the hall to look over the banisters. It was only the laundryman and he came back, relieved.

"Mother says it isn't nice to hang over the railing when the bell rings," said Meg reprovingly.

"I don't care, I will if I want to," was Bobby's answer to this. "What shall we play?"

"Soap bubbles," suggested Dot, and this

seemed to suit everyone, so Meg brought out the bowls and the pipes and an apron for Dot who was sure to need one.

The bell rang three times while Bobby was blowing soap bubbles and each time his heart gave a fearful thump. He was afraid Mr. Bennett had come to complain about the carpenter shop. But none of the rings brought him, and Bobby was beginning to think the carpenter was not coming that afternoon when suddenly he heard Norah calling him from the second floor hall.

"Bobby!" she called. "Bobby, your father wants you right away."

"I didn't hear the doorbell," said Bobby to himself as he walked slowly downstairs. "How could he come 'thout ringing the bell?"

Bobby never doubted that Mr. Bennett had come. And he had. He had come in his small work car and Father Blossom had seen him through the window and had gone to the door to save him waiting in the cold. That was why Bobby had not heard the doorbell.

Although he walked as slowly as he could,

Bobby finally came to the door of the living room. There was no one there for Mother Blossom, supposing that Mr. Bennett had come to talk business with Father Blossom, had excused herself and gone upstairs to write a letter.

"In here, Son," said Father Blossom's voice, and Bobby saw they were in the little back room where Father Blossom had his desk.

Mr. Bennett sat facing the door and Father Blossom sat at his desk. The carpenter was a short, heavy man with a red face and a deep, hoarse voice. He had small, quick blue eyes and just now they looked angry.

"Bobby," said Father Blossom quietly, "this is Mr. Bennett whose shop burned down last night. And he seems to think that you, and some other boys, are responsible for the fire."

"Think!" snorted Mr. Bennett. "Think! I don't think anything about it; I know those kids set the place on fire. And they've got to pay for it."

Bobby had got as far as the desk and there he stood, feeling very unhappy and a little ashamed.

"Were you in the shop at all, Bobby?" asked Father Blossom keenly.

"Yes, Daddy," replied Bobby bravely, raising his eyes. "I went in after the football. The window was open. And I didn't touch a thing. None of us did. Except the cat. We stroked her and made her purr."

"You needn't tell me that five boys—and I have the names of everyone of you—could go in a tool shop and not upset things," scolded Mr. Bennett. "I know as well as though I'd seen you do it, some of you kicked over turpentine and varnish and laid the foundations for the fire."

"We did not!" retorted Bobby. "I had to get the ball out, 'cause it wasn't mine. But I didn't set your old shop——"

"That will do, Son," interrupted Father Blossom. "You had absolutely no right to go into Mr. Bennett's shop in his absence and I am exceedingly sorry to hear you did such a thing. The other boys were wrong, too, and Mr. Bennett has a right to be angry. I don't think you are responsible for the fire, however,

and we hope we'll be able to convince Mr. Bennett presently."

"Convince me!" almost shouted the carpenter. "Why, I tell you those boys set my shop on fire! A parcel of young ones, skylarking over my work bench and in among my tools and varnishes—I wish I'd caught 'em at it! I could make 'em dance! And now that boy stands there and denies up and down he had anything to do with the fire and you expect me to believe him. I'm going up to the police court and get warrants out for every one of 'em, that's what I'm going to do!" shrieked the angry carpenter, thumping the desk.

Bobby turned pale and his knees began to wobble. But Father Blossom only shook his head.

"I don't think you will do that, Mr. Bennett," he said.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAGIC FOUNTAIN

FATHER BLOSSOM did not seem to be afraid of Mr. Bennett, though the carpenter's red face and angry eyes and the way he pounded the desk scared Bobby speechless. Father Blossom continued to sit quietly in his chair and when Mr. Bennett started toward the door, repeating that he was going uptown and "get warrants," Father Blossom merely said again, "I don't think you will do that, Mr. Bennett."

"Why not?" blustered the carpenter, stopping half way in the hall. "Why not? What's to stop me, I'd like to know?"

"Well, in the first place," said Father Blossom evenly, "the recorder isn't likely to take a complaint against boys seriously; and if he did, he would require more evidence than you seem to have. For instance, are you sure your

cat didn't upset this varnish and oil you speak of?"

"The cat!" sputtered Mr. Bennett. "It's likely a cat would do that, isn't it? I never heard such nonsense."

"You didn't see the cat do it, of course," admitted Father Blossom. "But neither did you see the boys. You only surmise. And a police complaint needs evidence to back it, Mr. Bennett."

The carpenter scolded and raged another ten minutes, but in the end he went away muttering that he guessed he'd wait a few days before having the boys arrested. When the front door banged behind him, Bobby breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now I want to know all about this affair," said Father Blossom gravely, and Bobby told him.

"We didn't set the shop on fire, honestly we didn't, Daddy," he concluded. "We didn't knock over anything. And I only touched the cat."

"No, I don't believe you set the place on fire,

either," said Father Blossom. "But remember after this, Bobby, that it is never right to go into a room or a shop or building that belongs to someone else when it is locked expressly to keep people out. You should have left the ball there and asked for it back when you could find Mr. Bennett. But then, boys don't think of that when they are playing and I won't blame you too severely for crawling through the window. But you made another mistake and one I think you must have known when you made it."

Bobby looked at the floor. "I—I didn't say anything 'bout the fire," he faltered.

"You didn't come straight to me when you heard Mr. Bennett was angry and accused you," said Father Blossom. "It makes me feel bad to learn that my boy was afraid to tell me he was in trouble."

This was too much for Bobby and he flung himself into his father's lap and cried a little, even if he was seven and a half years old.

"I wanted to tell you, Daddy," he insisted. "Honestly I did. But—but—the fellows——"

"Someone didn't want to tell, I suppose," said

Father Blossom. "Well, we don't like to go against our friends' wishes and sometimes they say we will get them into trouble if we do. But I think it is always best for a boy to tell his daddy, at least of his own share in anything like this. Next time you'll know better what to do."

Bobby was silent for a little while and then he asked timidly if the carpenter could have them arrested.

"I don't know, Son, but I doubt it," replied Father Blossom, who never pretended to know when he was not sure. "You want to say as little about this as possible and don't talk unkindly of Mr. Bennett with the other boys. You were not wholly in the right, you know, and he has lost a valuable collection of tools and much fine work. It is natural that he should feel bitter. If you are patient, some day he will find out that he has been mistaken and I know he is man enough to admit it when he discovers he is wrong."

Bobby was very quiet through dinner that night and he stayed closely to the house over Sunday. He did not tell even Meg about Mr. Bennett, though usually he told her everything

that happened to him. Mother Blossom knew, of course, but she did not speak of it. It was not till Meg went to school Monday morning that she heard of the mischief the five boys were supposed to have done.

"Oh, Bobby!" she gasped when she met him at the school gate at noon. "Bobby, do you know what that awful Charlie Black is saying about you? He says you and Fred Baldwin and Palmer Davis and Bertrand Ashe and that Lambert boy who was visiting Bertrand over Thanksgiving, set fire to Mr. Bennett's carpenter shop!"

"Charlie Black is a fibber!" said Bobby hotly. "We didn't set fire to the shop." And then, because there was no hope of satisfying Meg with anything less, he told her the whole story.

She was as indignant as any small sister would be and she assured Bobby that she knew he had not burned down the shop. But not everyone had so much faith, and as the news travelled through the school—as such news will—Bobby and the three other boys (Elmer Lambert had gone home Saturday afternoon and was safely

out of trouble) had to submit to much teasing and questioning. Charlie Black and Tim Roon taunted Bobby openly with having set fire to the carpenter shop, and one recess a pitched battle started between Bobby and his friends and Charlie Black and Tim Roon and their chums.

Fighting was strictly forbidden in the school yard and the culprits were marched in disgrace to the principal's office by one of the teachers who said that it was "a mercy Mr. Carter is here today and can punish you as you deserve."

Mr. Carter asked a few questions, scolded them all for breaking the rule against fighting and then sent Tim and Charlie and their three followers down to the gymnasium to wash off the dirt, first warning them that they were not to molest Bobby or his chums or make any reference whatever to the carpenter shop fire again.

Then the principal kept Bobby and Fred Palmer and Bertrand a few minutes longer while he told them that he did not believe they were responsible for the fire and that he thought very few people would ever believe it. But, he said, it was foolish to pay any attention to

taunts or teasing, and that when people were wrongly accused, if they were brave, it didn't matter to them what unkind things were said about them.

"And now you may go," said Mr. Carter smiling. "But there must be no more fighting. Another time I shall have to be more severe."

"I didn't even know he'd heard about the fire," said Bobby, walking home that noon with Meg. "I guess everybody in Oak Hill knows about it; and Mr. Bennett probably goes around telling everyone we set fire to his shop. Oh, dear, I wish I'd never played football!"

But Bobby forgot his troubles when he and Meg reached home and found that Dot and Twaddles were planning to give a play that afternoon.

"You must hurry right home from school," announced Dot importantly. "Mother is coming and so is Norah. The curtain raises at three."

"You talk as if the curtain were Norah's bread," giggled Meg. "You should say the curtain 'rises' at three, Dot."

"Huh, it doesn't rise, either," remarked Twaddles, who had come to the lunch table with his face streaked with dust. "It pulls apart!"

"How dirty your face is," observed Bobby, big-brother fashion. "Where are you going to give this play, Twaddles?"

"Up garret," answered Twaddles. "You pay six pins and you can come. And we have seats and everything."

"I don't know anything about it," laughed Mother Blossom when Bobby asked her what kind of a play the young ones were planning. "Dot and Twaddles have done it all themselves; they have been working all morning and aside from considerable racket, I wouldn't know there was to be a play. You and Meg will have to wait and see. And, Twaddles, my dear little son, how could you come to the table with such a dirty face?"

"That's shadows," said Twaddles comfortably. "Will you hurry, Meg?"

Meg and Bobby promised to hurry home from school that afternoon and they were

home twenty minutes after the dismissal bell had sounded. They paid their six pins to Twaddles, who stood at the door of the garret, and went in. Mother Blossom and Norah were already there, seated on a board placed on two small footstools.

"'Tisn't a very high seat," whispered Norah to Meg, who sat down beside her, "but then you haven't far to fall."

Meg and Bobby stared in surprise at the corner of the attic which the twins had curtained off for the stage. They would not let anybody help, so they had not been able to hang their curtains very high. A string had been stretched from one side of the wall to the other, where the garret roof began to slope, and two old lace curtains were flung over this. The audience could see through the lace without the slightest trouble but, as Dot said, they were supposed to pretend they couldn't.

"The play will begin in a minute," announced Twaddles, stepping out from behind the curtain. "It is called 'The Magic Fountain' and I invented some of it and Dot did, too."

The audience politely clapped, and Twaddles reached up to pull the curtains apart. Something went wrong, the string broke and curtains and cord came down upon the unfortunate stage manager. Bobby untangled him and Twaddles said he thought they could get along without curtains.

"Hurry up, Dot," he called in a loud whisper. "Come on, and begin. What are you waiting for?"

"I got it!" cried Dot, climbing out of a trunk that stood open on the "stage." She wore a blue silk dress that had been her grandmother's and was the pride of her heart because it had a long train.

"This is the fountain," declared Twaddles, pointing to the open trunk. "I am a witch-man and I point my wand at it and a beautiful princess comes out. You watch."

The summer before, Twaddles and Dot had seen an electric fountain and had watched fascinated while pretty girls and beautiful scenery and once what Dot called a "whole house" had

risen apparently out of the water. This had given them the idea for their play.

"You have to wait a minute while I put on my hair," said Dot so seriously that the audience did not dare laugh.

The desire of Dot for long golden curls was something no one could understand. All her dolls had to have yellow hair and she was always sighing for long, springy curls instead of the short, thick dark hair that covered her head. Now she carefully put on a circlet of pasteboard to which she had pinned long streamers of yellow crepe paper twisted to look something like curls.

"You look crazy," said Bobby frankly, but Twaddles withered him with a look.

"A heap you know about a princess," he said scornfully. "They always have long hair. Go on, Dot."

Dot curled herself into the trunk and Twaddles stood by it. He rapped with his wand three times and up rose the princess, slowly and gracefully, her yellow curls dangling half-way to her waist.

"Now go back!" commanded the witch-man, striking the trunk with his wand again to make the princess disappear.

She disappeared, but more quickly than she had intended. Twaddles' stick had jarred the heavy lid of the trunk and it crashed down, hiding the princess from view, but not shutting out her shrieks of fright.

"Mother!" screamed poor Dot. "Mother! Ow! Open it, Twaddles!"

"You're a fine witch-man," scolded Bobby, rushing for the trunk; but Mother Blossom and Norah reached it first.

CHAPTER VIII

CHRISTMAS AT SCHOOL

WELL, Dot wasn't hurt, and Mother had her out of the trunk in a jiffy. Dot, between her sobs, managed to remember that it was the end of the play, anyway, and that made her feel better. And after Twaddles had explained that he did not mean to knock so hard, they all went downstairs.

"I think it was worth six pins," said Bobby slowly, and Mother Blossom laughed and said she thought so, too.

For the first time in weeks the twins did not envy Bobby and Meg when they started off to school the next morning. It had snowed during the night, and great was the excitement of the four little Blossoms who awoke to find a beautiful white world.

"We can play in it, can't we?" urged Twaddles, bouncing around in his chair and nearly

upsetting Meg's oatmeal bowl. "Let's hurry and go out, Dot."

"I'm glad we don't have to go to school," said Dot. "Meg has to go; she can't play in the snow till this afternoon. And Bobby has to go to school—he can't play, either."

"I hate school!" muttered Bobby. "I wish I never had to go near the place."

Mother Blossom glanced at him in surprise and Father Blossom put down his paper and said if they'd hurry he would take him and Meg to school in the car. Mr. Bennett's story of the fire was known all over Oak Hill by this time and though his parents guessed that Bobby was not exactly happy under such an accusation, they did not know how much tormenting he had to endure. Mr. Carter managed to keep him and the other boys out of actual fights, but he could not prevent the sly teasing that went on. The lads in the upper grades took special delight in pretending that they heard fire engines whenever Bobby or any of the three boys accused with him of the burning of the carpenter

shop came near them. Bobby often said gloomily that he would like to run away.

"Well, school closes Friday," Meg reminded her brother cheerfully. "And it's almost Christmas. I have to go shopping Saturday."

"So do I, Meg," chimed in Dot. "I have to go shopping. Can't I go with you?"

"I'll go, too," said Twaddles placidly. "I have ten cents to spend."

"I want to go by myself," declared Meg. "I don't see why you always have to tag along."

"I shouldn't think you'd want to go where you're not wanted," said Bobby crossly.

"Well, we do," retorted Twaddles. "We're going—you'll see."

"Why, this doesn't sound much like Christmas," said Father Blossom in surprise. "You'll be quarreling in a minute, and no one should ever quarrel at Christmas time. If you're coming with me, Meg and Bobby, get your things on. And, Dot and Twaddles, I thought you were going to play out in the snow?"

The thought of the snow restored Dot and Twaddles to good humor and they ran to get

their mittens and leggings and coats, while Meg and Bobby rode to school with Sam and Father Blossom.

When they came home at noon, they had news to tell of the last day, before the Christmas vacation began.

"We're not going to have exercises this year," reported Meg, "but Miss Wright is going to read us a Christmas story and everybody will sing. And then there is a big Christmas tree and every child brings two presents—not great, big expensive ones, Mother, but little silly ones."

"What's a silly present?" demanded Twaddles.

"Mother," said Meg with dignity, "can't I ever speak to you without Twaddles listening?"

"I'm not listening," cried Twaddles, much hurt. "And Dot isn't listening, either."

"What do you suppose Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda will think of children who squabble as you do?" said Mother Blossom. "Bobby, will you bring me the letter that is on the hall table, like my good little son?"

"Is Uncle Dave coming?" asked Meg.

"Yes, dear, he and Aunt Miranda are coming to spend Christmas with us," replied Mother Blossom. "The letter came this morning. They will get here—let me see, when did uncle write they would get here?"

Mother Blossom opened the letter Bobby brought her and ran over the faint, small handwriting hastily. Uncle Dave was her own uncle, and great-uncle to the four little Blossoms. He was an old man and it was not easy for him to write a letter.

"Uncle Dave writes they will be here Monday, that is the day before Christmas," said Mother Blossom. "I am so glad they can come; they have never seen Dot and Twaddles, you know."

"Well, Mother, may Bobby and I go shopping without coming home from school this afternoon?" asked Meg. "We have to get two things apiece, that's four altogether."

"Let us go, Mother?" begged Dot. "We can go and meet Meg and Bobby after school."

"I think Meg and Bobby should have this afternoon alone to buy the presents for the

school Christmas tree," said Mother Blossom firmly. "Then, Saturday morning, you may all go shopping together. How will that be?"

This seemed to suit everyone, and Mother Blossom gave Bobby an extra kiss as he and Meg hurried back to school. Bobby did not have much to say about school nowadays, and Mother Blossom was sorry he did not feel happier.

"Mother gave me forty cents," said Meg as they walked along. "We mustn't buy anything that costs more than ten cents, Miss Wright said."

"Who do we give 'em to?" asked Bobby curiously.

"Why, didn't you hear Miss Wright when she was talking this morning in assembly?" asked Meg, surprised. "She said she'll have a basket in her office tomorrow, two baskets I mean, one for boys' presents and one for the girls. And we wrap our things up and drop them in, one for a boy and one for a girl; then Miss Wright puts the names on and no one knows what the presents are, not even Miss Wright or Mr. Carter."

As soon as school was out that afternoon Bobby and Meg started for the stores. It had stopped snowing soon after noon, and the walks were wet and slippery. Some of the children had their sleds out but there was not enough snow for good sledding or coasting.

"We'll go to the five-and-ten-cent store," planned Meg. "Isn't it fun to buy four things!"

She and Bobby spent over an hour, looking at everything on the long counters, and finally Meg bought a chain of blue beads for a girl and a little red-covered address book for a boy. Bobby chose a little pin tray for a girl and for his boy's present he selected a key-ring.

The twins were nearly beside themselves with eagerness to see the presents, and they insisted on helping tie them up, and Dot wanted to take them to the school and put them in the baskets that night.

"You don't believe in wasting time, do you, Dot?" teased Father Blossom. "However, I think tomorrow morning will be better. Meg says the tree will not be trimmed till Friday."

The next day was Thursday, and Meg and

Bobby took their tissue-paper wrapped parcels to school and dropped them into the two large baskets which stood in the vice-principal's office. There was a buzz of excitement in every classroom and Miss Lee, Bobby's teacher, said that school might as well close then and there for all the work that was being done.

"Tim Roon, if I see you whispering once more," Miss Lee scolded, "you will have to stay after school an hour tomorrow night. What are you and Charlie Black giggling over?"

Tim Roon merely stopped whispering, but did not explain.

"I wish we could go see the tree," said Twaddles wistfully Thursday night. "Meg and Bobby have all the fun."

"Why, Twaddles!" said Mother Blossom. "You and Dot are going shopping Saturday morning, you know you are. And Norah and I need you tomorrow to help us get ready for Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda."

So Twaddles cheered up and decided that he was important, after all.

Friday morning, Meg and Bobby pattered away to school for the one session which always featured the last day before the close of a term or the beginning of a holiday. They found the building bright with wreaths and ropes of Christmas greens.

"Have you seen the tree?" asked Palmer Davis excitedly, meeting Bobby in the hall. "It's a great big one, almost as high as the ceiling. And all the presents are tied on. They did it last night."

The pupils filed into the assembly hall as usual, but it is doubtful whether any of them heard the Bible reading or knew which song they were singing. All eyes were fastened on the beautiful big tree which towered nearly to the ceiling. It was sprinkled with tissue-paper packages and looked as mysterious as though Santa Claus had trimmed it himself.

There was an hour or so of work in the classrooms, putting the desks in order for the holiday recess, and making sure that no loose papers were left in the books, and then the gong sounded again and the whole four grades

marched back to the assembly hall for the exercises.

Bobby's class sat directly across the aisle from Meg's and she saw him and smiled. Miss Wright read them a Christmas story that made every one think of Christmas Eve and stockings to be filled and all the fun of Christmas morning; then the school sang two Christmas carols and then, and *then* it was time to distribute the presents. Mr. Carter came in to do that. He had spent half the morning at the grammar school exercises.

It was great fun and there was so much talk and laughter—for Mr. Carter himself said that they should talk as much as they pleased—that even the janitor peeped in to see what the racket was about. The pupils were told to unwrap their presents as soon as they received them and such a collection you never saw! There were tin whistles and small horns, and these, of course, the boys simply had to test at once, and ribbons and little dolls and candy and paint boxes, and indeed about everything you could hope to mention.

Meg had a tiny painting set (which she planned to give to Dot) and a doll's fan for her gifts, and she looked about for Bobby to show them to him as soon as she had unwrapped them. She found him in one corner of the room with Palmer Davis, Bertrand and Fred. Bobby looked very angry.

"I think it's mean," Fred was saying as Meg came up.

"If I knew who did it," began Bobby hotly, but Miss Mason approached him smilingly before he could finish what he meant to say.

"Let me see what you have, Bobby," she said pleasantly.

Bobby put his hands behind his back and looked obstinate.

"Bobby, I asked you to let me see your Christmas presents," said Miss Mason, beginning to look severe.

"I—I won't!" blurted Bobby, trying to get behind Fred Baldwin.

"Bobby Blossom, how dare you speak to me like that!" exclaimed Miss Mason, losing her temper, while Meg wished she wouldn't scold

Bobby in such a loud tone. All the children were listening. "Mr. Carter, what do you think of a boy who flatly refuses to obey?"

Mr. Carter turned when Miss Mason raised her voice. He said nothing, but Bobby knew that he was looking at him. He could not bear to have the principal think he was stubborn and he was dreadfully afraid he was going to cry. He jerked his hand up and threw what he held directly at the astonished Miss Mason.

"Why, it's a piece of coal!" said Meg aloud.

CHAPTER IX

COMPANY COMES

"I'M VERY sorry this happened," said Mr. Carter gravely.

He and Meg and Bobby stood in the hall, just outside the Assembly hall, where the children were singing the closing Christmas carol. The principal had beckoned to Bobby when the music began and Meg had followed them.

"I'm very sorry," repeated Mr. Carter. "Do you know who sent this piece of coal to you, Bobby?"

"No, sir!" said Bobby hastily. "I don't know at all."

"And you evidently don't want me to guess," said the principal with a half-smile. "I think that will be better, after all. Just pretend to pay no attention and whoever is trying to tease you will see that he has missed his aim. Did I hand this to you from the tree, Bobby? Was there anything with it?"

"Yes, you gave it to me," replied Bobby. "My other present was a game."

"Was there anything with the piece of coal?" persisted Mr. Carter.

"There was a piece of paper that said 'to help you start another fire,' " said Bobby jerkily. "I tore it up."

"I should have liked to see the writing," remarked Mr. Carter. "But never mind. Evidently someone removed one package marked with your name from the basket last night, after we finished working, or it may have been this morning, and substituted the coal. The best thing to do is to ignore the silly trick altogether."

The carol ended just as he finished speaking and the assembly broke up. Mr. Carter put his arm around Bobby, wished him a Merry Christmas, and said that he must let nothing spoil his holidays. Then he shook hands with Meg and wished her "Merry Christmas," too, and they were free to go. As they went slowly upstairs to get their wraps, for the corridors were crowded, they passed Miss Mason.

"Merry Christmas, Bobby!" she smiled and nodded. "And you, too, Meg."

That was Miss Mason's way of telling Bobby that she understood why he had been cross and that she knew he did not mean to be rude. Bobby's own sunny smile answered her and he began to feel better directly. By the time he reached home he had almost forgotten the piece of coal.

"No more school for two weeks!" he shouted, prancing into the kitchen where Mother Blossom and Norah were.

"It's snowing! It's snowing!" shrieked the twins, tumbling up the back steps and bursting into the kitchen like two small whirlwinds. "There's going to be snow on Christmas!"

As soon as lunch was over, the four little Blossoms went out to play in the snow and they spent the time till dinner teaching Philip to pull the sled. The dog didn't like it very well, but the children had glorious fun and came in with such red cheeks and such appetites that Father Blossom declared he was almost tempted to go out and play in the snow himself.

"And now we're going shopping!" announced Twaddles the next morning. "We have ever so much money, haven't we, Meg?"

"Is Meg the banker?" asked Father Blossom.

"She carries the money," explained Twaddles. "Dot has twenty-five cents and I have twenty, and Meg has forty and Bobby has—how much have you, Bobby?"

"Fifty cents," said Bobby. "I saved it."

"I could have earned 'bout fifty dollars, if Mother would let me," sighed Dot. "But she wouldn't."

"Why, Dot, dear, what are you talking about?" asked Mother Blossom, puzzled. "How could a little girl like you earn money?"

"Errands," said Dot briefly. "Folks wanted to give me pennies for errands every time; but you said we mustn't take pennies."

"Not for doing little kindnesses," declared Mother Blossom firmly. "Just remember the times the neighbors have given you cookies and cloth for doll dresses, Dot, and sent you postal cards from far away cities. I know you and Twaddles are both glad to do an errand now and

then for the Peabodys and the Wards and the Hiltons."

"Why, of course they are," said Father Blossom. "And that reminds me, I have four shiny new quarters in my pocket that I've been saving for you children. Perhaps that will help you with this Christmas shopping."

The four little Blossoms were sure it would, and when they started uptown soon after breakfast they felt very rich indeed. Meg carried the money in a beaded bag and Dot sat on the sled. They were sure they would need a sled to bring the bundles home on. It had stopped snowing but there was a thick, snowy blanket on every street and the sled pulled easily.

"How many presents do we have to buy, Meg?" asked Dot, who certainly depended on Meg for a great deal of information.

"Mother, Daddy, Norah, Sam, Twaddles, Bobby and me," counted Meg on her fingers. "You have to buy seven presents."

"Eight, counting me," said Dot.

"You don't buy a present for yourself," Bobby reminded her.

"Oh, yes, that's so, I don't," admitted Dot. "Well, then does each of us have to buy seven presents?"

"We're forgetting Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda," said Meg. "It wouldn't be nice to have them come see us Christmas and not have any presents. That makes nine."

Dear, dear, nine presents are a good many to buy and it took the four little Blossoms several minutes to decide how much they had to spend on each gift. They sat down on somebody's doorstep while Bobby figured it out for them. He said they must spend exactly the same amount on each present because he couldn't be working out arithmetic examples all morning.

"Dot can spend five and one-tenth cents on each present," announced Bobby after much hard work with a stubby pencil and a slip of paper from Meg's bag.

"I'd rather it came out even," objected Dot.

"It can't," Bobby informed her. "That's arithmetic. Meg can spend seven and two-sixty-fifths cents."

"You can't buy anything for that," pouted

Meg. "I tell you what let's do—divide up the presents; you get one for Norah and I'll get one for Sam. And Dot can get something for Aunt Miranda, and Twaddles can get a present for Uncle David. Like that, you know."

The four little Blossoms thought this was a sensible plan, after they had talked it over, though Bobby said he wished Meg had thought of it before he done had so much arithmetic.

"I'm going to get a present for Mother and Daddy," he added.

Each of the children were determined to buy a present for Father and Mother Blossom, so that was understood, too. And when they reached the five-and-ten-cent store, they separated, because Christmas shopping should always be a secret. Bobby left the sled with the boy who kept a paper stand next door, and he was the first one through with his shopping. He had to wait nearly half an hour and then Meg and Dot struggled out of the crowd together, their arms full of small packages. Twaddles was the last one to come and he car-

ried one large bundle that was so big around he could scarcely clasp his hands about it.

"Did you spend all your money for one thing?" asked Meg curiously, while they piled their purchases on the sled.

"No, the others are inside of that," replied Twaddles, gazing at his bundle with loving pride. "But you can't see 'em."

The four little Blossoms ploughed home through the snow and that afternoon they were very busy, tying up packages in tissue paper and writing names on the pretty tags and seals Mother Blossom gave them. Mother Blossom herself was busy doing up Christmas gifts to mail and she had a whole sledful for the children to take to the post-office late that afternoon. Among the parcels were several for Aunt Polly and one for Jud and another for Linda who lived with Aunt Polly at Brookside Farm.

Tuesday would be Christmas, and Monday morning Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda came. The four little Blossoms went with Father Blossom in the car to the station to meet them. Meg and Bobby had seen them once, when Bobby was

three years old and Meg two, but, of course, they did not remember them clearly.

"Well, well, well," said Uncle Dave, when he saw the children almost tumbling out of the car to greet him. "So these are the four little Blossoms, eh? What goes round and round and never touches the sky or ground?"

"What does?" asked Dot who loved riddles.

"You do," said Uncle Dave kissing her. "You haven't had your feet on the ground two minutes since I first caught sight of you."

Uncle Dave was a rather tall old man, with slightly stooped shoulders and eyes that twinkled whenever he looked at anyone. He wore a soft felt hat with a high crown and a narrow, curving brim. Out of the pocket of his overcoat peeped a corncob pipe. Uncle Dave was very fond of his old cob pipe, the children soon discovered.

Aunt Miranda was a tiny little old lady with snow white hair and snapping black eyes. She was so muffled up in shawls and scarfs and capes that no one realized how tiny she was till she was all "unwound," as Bobby said. The first

thing she did when they had reached the house and she had kissed Mother Blossom, was to put on a black silk apron and take her knitting out of the pocket. And during her visit no one ever saw Aunt Miranda without her knitting. She did not believe in idle hands.

The four little Blossoms always trimmed their own Christmas tree, and right after lunch they went to work. Uncle Dave insisted on helping and he was so tall and had such long arms that he was every bit as good as a step-ladder. How he laughed when Twaddles, watching him admiringly, told him this.

"I must tell Aunt Miranda that," he chuckled. "She always says I put things out of her reach. She is so short that what I put away on the closet shelves, she has to stand on a chair to get down."

The tree looked beautiful when it was all trimmed. Meg and Dot had strung the ropes of popcorn and the cranberries and Bobby and Uncle Dave had put on the gold and silver ornaments which were carefully saved from year to year. Twaddles always claimed the right to sprinkle the white cotton and mica on

for the snow, and just before dinner Father Blossom put the star at the top of the tree and Sam Layton came in to fix the electric lights. Norah had baked the gingerbread men which hung from the branches, and Mother Blossom and Aunt Miranda had made the candied apples on sticks which helped to trim the tree. All the Blossom family had a hand in getting the tree ready, you see, which was one reason, perhaps, they always loved to have one.

"Now we light it after dinner, and put all the other lights out," Bobby explained to Aunt Miranda. "And then we hang up our stockings and then we go to bed."

And after dinner the tree was lighted, and the four little Blossoms marched around it, singing the Christmas carols they had learned. Then Mother Blossom helped them to hang up their stockings, four in a row, fastened to the mantlepiece—and very long and black and empty they looked, dangling there—and they said goodnight and pattered upstairs to bed.

Just before Mother Blossom tucked them in

for the night, Bobby ran over to the window to look at the weather.

"It's snowing some more!" he cried. "Twaddles, Santa Claus won't have a bit of trouble getting here; the roof will be covered with snow!"

"If you hear him, you call me," directed Twaddles.

"Call me," begged Dot sleepily from her bed. "I want to tell him something special."

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS AT HOME

WHATEVER it was Dot wanted to tell Santa Claus, he was not to hear it this Christmas. When the four little Blossoms woke Christmas morning, it was already light and they tumbled downstairs to find the four stockings bulging with knobby packages. They made so much noise that they awoke everyone else in the house and Norah served breakfast a half hour earlier than usual.

"Could I open one bundle, Mother?" Twaddles kept saying. "Could I open one bundle? Just that little square one. That doesn't look exciting, Mother."

"That little square one happens to be marked with my name, young man," said Father Blossom, "and I don't intend to have any surprises spoiled ahead of time."

The Blossom family never opened their Christmas gifts till after breakfast Christmas morning. The children had their stockings and that was supposed to keep them contented till it came time to open the parcels; but often they thought they just could not wait another minute after the first peep at the little mountain of white paper packages under the tree.

"I declare, Twaddles, you remind me of a bumble bee on a hot griddle," said Uncle Dave laughingly. "I never saw anyone in such a hurry to get through his breakfast; now I call these hot rolls first-rate and I need another cup of coffee, please, Margaret," he added to Mother Blossom.

"Dave, I think you're real mean," scolded Aunt Miranda, but she spoke so gently, no one thought she really meant to scold. "How can you sit there and drink another cup of that hot coffee when you know these children are counting the minutes till they can open their presents? It isn't good for you to drink that much coffee, anyway."

"All right, I won't take the second cup," said

Uncle Dave meekly. "I seem to have had my breakfast, then, Margaret."

"May we be 'scused, Mother?" shouted the four little Blossoms. "Please, Mother? Is it time to open the things now, Mother?"

Mother Blossom laughed and said they would all go into the living room and look at their presents. And in ten minutes that beautiful, orderly room was a sea of white tissue paper and seals and string and pink and blue cotton. How Aunt Miranda laughed when she unwrapped one canvas glove!

"I couldn't afford to buy two of them," Dot explained, "because I had to buy a present for Mother and Daddy, too. But you can use one hand, can't you, Aunt Miranda?"

"Why, of course, I can," Aunt Miranda said heartily. "I'll wear it when I'm fussing with my garden this spring, Dot, and think of you every time I wear it."

Aunt Miranda had knitted a lovely scarf of brushed wool with mittens to match for each of the children, and a tam-o-shanter hat for Meg and one for Dot. The four little Blossoms were

delighted with these, as they might well be. Dot's set was of scarlet wool, Meg's was a delicate blue, Bobby had brown and Twaddles' set was a light buff color. Uncle Dave had whittled each of the boys a ship, and for Meg he had made a little chain of curious wooden beads and another smaller chain for Dot.

It took a long time to see all the presents for there were a good many of them and everyone wanted to show his gifts to everyone else. Sam was very proud of the little diary Meg had given him and he promised to write in it every day; Norah laughed till she cried over the cologne bottle Bobby gave her for he had pulled the cork out to smell of it after he got it home and the cologne had either evaporated or had been spilled and the tiny bottle was quite empty. But as Norah said, when she thanked Bobby, it still smelled exactly like cologne. Twaddles had bought a pocket knife with six blades for Uncle Dave and not one of them would open. But Uncle Dave declared he liked that kind of a knife because it always looked well and yet there was no danger that he would cut himself.

Each of the four little Blossoms, with much panting and counting of their pennies, had managed to buy Father Blossom a present and another for Mother.

"I'm so overcome I don't know how to say 'thank you,'" announced Father Blossom when he had Bobby's ash tray on the table beside him, Meg's red stickpin in his tie, Dot's paper weight on his desk in the den and the handkerchief Twaddles had given him in his pocket.

Mother Blossom was delighted with the cup and saucer Meg gave her and she declared that the pin tray Bobby had chosen for her was exactly what she needed for her dresser and that Dot must have known she wanted another glass dish. But when she came to Twaddles' present Mother Blossom looked puzzled.

"What in the world can this be?" she said, unwrapping it slowly.

They all crowded around her while she undid the paper and when she held up an enameled pot, such as Norah used to boil the potatoes in, everyone looked surprised. Except Twaddles.

"Isn't it nice?" he urged. "Course it has a

little hole in it, but that was why I could buy it for ten cents. It used to be thirty cents, Mother. Don't you like it?"

"Why, Twaddles, of course I do," said Mother Blossom, kissing him. "I like it very much and you must have loved me dearly to buy such a large kettle. I'll find some way to use it, even if there is a little hole in it."

After all the presents had been seen, and the four little Blossoms had so many toys and games that Father Blossom said folks must have made a mistake and thought they didn't have a single thing to play with before, Mother Blossom reminded them that they were to feed the birds. The children did this every year, tying pieces of suet to long strings and hanging these in the trees where the birds could easily find them. They also sprinkled plenty of bread-crumbs in dry sheltered places, off the ground so that no cats should bother the birds at dinner.

"The snow's awful deep," said Bobby, stamping in from helping to feed the birds. "Couldn't we go coasting, Mother?"

"After dinner, dear," replied Mother Blos-

som. "If you went now, you would have to hurry back. After dinner you may all go and wear your new scarfs and mittens, too."

Christmas dinner was a wonderful affair, with a huge brown turkey and a plum pudding surrounded by a wreath of holly. Philip and Annabel Lee had an extra good meal, too, in the garage where they preferred to spend most of their time. Philip seemed to feel that he was really Sam's dog and Annabel Lee liked to sleep on the old fur robe Sam kept especially for her.

"So you're going coasting, hey?" said Uncle Dave, when after dinner the four little Blossoms began to bundle themselves up and Bobby went down cellar and brought up the sleds. "Did you ever hear the story, Meg, about the little girl who coasted into a snow bank and wasn't seen again till the next spring?"

"Oh, no," answered Meg, her eyes round with wonder. "Was she all dead, Uncle Dave?"

"Mercy, I should hope not!" said Uncle Dave, his eyes twinkling more than ever. "You see,

it was spring the next day by the calendar, though there was snow on the ground."

"Dave, you shouldn't tease the children," reproved Aunt Miranda, coming into the hall and knitting as she walked. "They won't know, pretty soon, when you are in earnest and when you're not."

"I like to hear stories," said Meg, pulling her tam down over her yellow hair. "Don't you want to come coasting, Uncle Dave?"

"Well, no, I'd rather stay home and smoke," replied Uncle Dave placidly. "I've had my day coasting. When I was the age of Dot, my father made me a sled and I went up on the roof and coasted off the woodshed and was in bed a week."

"I wouldn't be putting such notions in the heads of children, Dave," said Aunt Miranda, gently. "They'll be wanting to coast off the roof next."

"No, we can't," said Twaddles sadly. "We haven't any woodshed."

The four little Blossoms had two sleds, just alike; one for Meg and Dot and the other for

Bobby and Twaddles. Wayne Place Hill was the finest coasting spot in Oak Hill and when they reached it this afternoon, they found a crowd of girls and boys already enjoying the fun. Some of them had new Christmas sleds and some, like the four little Blossoms, had sleds that were almost new and some had old, old sleds that were battered and scarred and tied up with rope to make them last. And, strange to say, the children who had the oldest sleds seemed to be having as good a time as the ones with brand-new shiny sleds.

Meg was immediately surrounded by little girls who wanted her to "take us down." Meg was only six years old, but she could steer a sled as well as Bobby and her small friends knew it.

"Don't take Hester," said Marion Green to Meg. "She always screams and makes folks think she is hurt. And once she grabbed my brother and pulled him right over backward."

Marion Green and Hester Scott were both in Meg's class at school. Hester was a fat little

girl and generally smiling. But now she looked ready to cry.

"I haven't been down the hill once this whole afternoon," she declared. "I'll lend Dot my sled, Meg, if you'll take me down. And I won't scream a tiny bit, honestly I won't."

"All right, I'll take you," said Meg briefly. "Let Dot have your sled and she can play round with it till I come back. She can't coast down alone either."

Hester knelt on the sled behind Meg, and Bobby obligingly gave them a send-off push. The moment she felt the rush of air, Hester forgot her promise.

"Stop it!" she begged. "Oh, Meg, please stop. I can't breathe! Ow! Somebody stop us! Ow, we're going to hit that red sled! Oh, Meg, please, please——"

She flung her arms around Meg's neck and leaned back with her whole weight. Up came Meg's hands, the sled shot to one side and the two girls tumbled off into the snow.

"I told you so! I told you so!" Marion kept saying as she ran down toward them, and Dot

and Twaddles and Bobby came running, too. "She always does that."

"I don't either!" protested Hester. "But I couldn't breathe or anything, and I was scared."

"That's just like a girl," said Fred Baldwin in disgust. "They always get scared."

"Who always gets scared?" asked Stanley Reeves, one of the high school boys, hearing this sentence as he was passing the group on his way up hill.

"Why, I don't think girls are all like that at all," said Stanley, when he had heard Fred's explanation. "I tell you what we'll do—we'll clear the hill and let the girls have a race. Any girl who is willing to steer her own sled may enter. Come on back to the top and we'll settle this little matter."

Fred Baldwin walked beside Bobby.

"Say, Bobby," he said in an undertone. "Palmer and Bertrand and I want to see you about something. Can you come over tomorrow?"

"Is it about the fire?" asked Bobby in quick alarm. "Has Mr. Bennett said anything more?"

"Yes, he has," admitted Fred. "I can't tell you now. You come over to my house tomorrow morning."

"You come over to our house," suggested Bobby. "Bring the boys. I said I'd help the children start a snowman in the yard. We can go out in the garage and talk and nobody will hear us."

Fred said they would come and then he hurried on to watch the coasting race. But Bobby's pleasure in the sport was spoiled. He began to worry again about the fire in the carpenter shop. What had Mr. Bennett been saying?

CHAPTER XI

MR. WHITE

STANLEY was as good as his word and he and several other high school lads kept the coasters off while ten small girls, all who were willing to try their skill at steering, started down the hill when he gave the word. Two of them capsized almost at once, three lasted half way down, one ran into a gutter and of the four who reached the bottom of the hill safely, Meg was the first.

"You're the winner," Stanley informed her. "And I didn't see any of those who fell off act as though frightened. What do you have to say for yourself, Fred?"

"Oh, well, girls are different," said Fred, looking at Meg admiringly.

"But you said they always get scared," insisted Stanley relentlessly.

"I meant some of them do," said Fred uneasily.

And then Stanley took pity on him and invited all the ten little girls to have a coast on his bob-sled which was certainly the largest and swiftest sled on the hill.

The four little Blossoms left Wayne Place Hill when the town clock struck five and all the way home they talked of what they meant to do during the holidays. That is Meg and Dot and Twaddles talked, but Bobby remained silent.

"I hope there will be skating," said Meg. "If there is anything I love it is skating. I don't know which is more fun, skating or coasting."

"I like skating better," declared Twaddles. "Don't you, Dot?"

"Yes," agreed Dot, "I do. And I'm going to ask Daddy to buy us some skates. I'm sure we're old enough to have 'em this year."

"But you don't either of you know how to skate," said Meg. "So how do you know you like it better than coasting?"

They argued about this the rest of the way home and were still at it when they trooped into the living room, where Aunt Miranda and her

knitting and Uncle Dave with his corncob pipe, sat before the fire.

"Have a good time?" Uncle Dave asked the four little Blossoms. "You did? That's fine. I don't suppose you looked in the oven as you came through the kitchen to see what we're going to have for supper?"

Twaddles offered at once to go and see. Aunt Miranda was shocked at Uncle Dave and he sat there and laughed so much Meg and Dot had to laugh with him. Even Bobby smiled, though he was still serious.

"What ails Bobby, Mother?" asked Twaddles suddenly. "I guess he has something on his mind."

Twaddles had heard some older person say this, but it was too near the truth to be comfortable for Bobby.

"Mother," he said, trying to look over Twaddles' head, "Mother, is there any place in this house where a person can think?"

"Just what I've often wondered, Son," said Father Blossom, coming into the room. "If you find such a place, let me know."

"Supper's ready," announced Mother Blossom, smiling, "and you'll have to wait till afterward to think. I know you children are hungry, in spite of Christmas dinner, after all that coasting."

Supper finished, Bobby forgot that he had wanted a quiet place in which to think, for they all gathered around the glowing fire and Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda told stories of the Christmas days they remembered years and years ago, when they were little. Some of the stories were most exciting, and Twaddles' eyes were as "large as saucers" Aunt Miranda said, when she told them of standing outside the house when she was a tiny girl and having a slide of snow from the roof strike her and bury her out of sight.

"I thought you were going to build a snowman," said Uncle Dave, the story apparently reminding him of snow figures. "Didn't I hear something about a snowman yesterday?"

"We're going to build him tomorrow morning," replied Meg. "Can't we, Mother? Just you wait till you see him, Uncle Dave."

Though the children went to bed early so that they might feel like getting up the next morning and going to work at the snowman, they did not begin to build him till after lunch. Father Blossom offered to take everyone for a long ride in the car as soon as they finished breakfast and they did not get back till half-past twelve.

"Come on, we're going to build the snowman!" cried Meg, hurrying into the hall for her hat and coat as soon as they were through luncheon. "You watch, Uncle Dave, and we'll build him close to the house; you can see from the back windows."

"I'll come look after a bit," said Uncle Dave. "I have to have a little nap afternoons, you know. Been working so hard this morning, I'm all tuckered out."

So Uncle Dave lay down on the big sofa to enjoy a little nap and Aunt Miranda sat beside him and knitted, while the four little Blossoms went seriously to work to build the best snowman they had ever built.

"We want him nice," said Meg, beginning

to help Bobby roll a snowball for his body. "Uncle Dave is going home tomorrow. He said so. And we want to show him we know how to build snowmen."

"I think he's lovely," said Dot, when Bobby put another snowball on for the head and began to make holes for the eyes. "Per-fectly lovely. Daddy, see our snowman! Isn't he nice?"

The car had stopped at the curb and Dot's quick eyes had spied her father. He came toward them, around the side of the house, and smiled when he saw what they were doing.

"Well, well, that is a mighty fine snowman," he said. "Mighty fine. What do you call him, Meg?"

Meg was always expected to name any new pet or a new doll, and why not a snowman, too? The three other children looked at her confidently, sure that she would be able to think of a name.

"His name," said Meg slowly, "his name is—let me think a minute; oh, I guess his name is Mr. White!"

Father Blossom laughed and kissed her, and

Bobby said he thought that was a splendid name.

"Are you going to stay home, Daddy?" asked Meg, clinging to Father Blossom. "Or are you going to take us somewhere?"

"Neither," he answered promptly. "I came home to get some papers from my desk and then Sam is going to drive me over to Clifton; I'm not sure what condition the roads are in and I don't think it wise to take anyone else. I'm glad you're having such a good time."

He went into the house and came out the back way again, in a few moments.

"Meg," he called over his shoulder as he walked to the car, "why don't you get Mr. White a hat to keep him from taking cold, and a pipe to keep his nose warm? He ought to have some comforts, you know."

"Could we get him a hat?" asked Meg doubtfully. "Oh, Bobby, there's Fred and Palmer and Bertrand. Don't go off and play with them, please; stay and play with us."

The three boys came into the yard and Dot disappeared toward the house. She had a way

of slipping off when she thought of something she wanted to do.

"Gee, that's a pretty good snowman," said Fred, looking at Mr. White with great respect. "I think he's the biggest one I ever saw."

"Yes, he's pretty good," chimed in Palmer. "Who built him?"

"We all did," said Bobby proudly. "For goodness' sake, what's that, Dot?"

Dot was out of breath from running and in her hand she held an odd-shaped soft felt hat and a corncob pipe.

"Put 'em on Mr. White, Bobby," she urged. "The way Daddy said."

"Isn't that Uncle Dave's pipe?" asked Bobby.

"Yes, but he's asleep; he doesn't need it when he's asleep," said Dot.

So Bobby ran and borrowed a chair from Norah and stood on it to put the hat on Mr. White and place the pipe in his mouth. To be sure he stuck the pipe in upside down, but no one thought that made any difference.

"That's great!" said Palmer Davis. But he

looked at Bobby as though he were trying to tell him something.

"You go over to the garage and I'll be there in a minute," directed Bobby. "I have to take this chair back to the kitchen."

The three boys went off to the garage whistling and Bobby climbed back on the chair to fix Mr. White's hat more firmly, wondering what in the world they wanted to say to him.

"Lend me your necktie, Twaddles," he said suddenly. "Who ever heard of a man without a necktie?"

Twaddles took off his red tie and gave it to Bobby who tied it around the snowman's neck in a twinkling. And then, before he could get down from the chair, the four little Blossoms heard Aunt Miranda calling. She had come out on the back porch with an apron thrown around her head to keep her from taking cold.

"Meg, Meg," she called. "Have you seen anything of Uncle Dave's hat? And his pipe is gone, too. He can't remember what he did with that."

Meg looked at Dot and Dot looked at the

sky. But before anyone could say a word, Aunt Miranda saw Mr. White and his hat and pipe. How she did laugh! She ran into the house to tell Uncle Dave to come and look, and he came to the door and Norah, too. Uncle Dave had finished his nap and decided to come out and see what the children were doing and that was when he missed his hat and pipe.

"But I wouldn't think of disturbing a gentleman who needs 'em worse than I do," he said merrily. "Leave 'em be till tonight, and let your father see how you've taken his advice. I don't want the hat till after supper, anyway."

Leaving Meg and the twins to admire their snowman, Bobby dashed off to the garage. He felt that he could not wait another moment to hear what the boys wanted to tell him. They were waiting for him with sober faces and Fred looked around as though he feared someone might be listening, as he whispered, "I heard that Mr. Bennett wants to have us all arrested!"

Bobby had not heard a word, but Palmer and Fred had overheard two men talking in the back of a shoemaker's shop the day before Christmas,

as they waited for a pair of shoes to be mended.

"He keeps saying we did it, and he doesn't mean to wait much longer," said Palmer. "Do you suppose they'll put us in prison, Bobby?"

"I—I guess so," nodded Bobby gloomily. "That is, if they catch us. Say, why don't we run away?"

This was a new idea, but the other three boys liked it at once. Before they left the garage, their plans were all made to run away that night. There was no use waiting, Bobby said.

"I'll meet you at the corner, at ten o'clock," he said. "And we can't carry much baggage. We can't run with a trunk, and we may have to run."

"Do we say good-bye to anyone?" asked Fred.

"Not a single person," said Bobby, "Not even your mother. And remember not to bang the front door. Daddy is going to lodge meeting tonight, I think, so I can get away easily."

After the boys had gone, Bobby did not go back to where Meg and the twins were playing with Mr. White. Instead he went upstairs and began to pack. He spread out a clean handker-

chief on the window sill in his room and in it he put his pocket-knife, the one Twaddles always wanted to borrow, two gum drops that were so hard he had never expected to eat them, the watch spring Uncle Dave had given him and which he meant to use in an "invention" some day, and a piece of soft, kneaded rubber. These were the things he liked best and he thought they would all be useful on a journey.

"What red cheeks Bobby has!" said Mother Blossom at dinner that night. "I do hope he hasn't taken cold, playing in the snow."

"I'm all right," declared Bobby, wishing that everyone would not look at him. He was afraid they would see that he was excited because he was going to run away.

CHAPTER XII

RUNNING AWAY

AS it happened, Bobby could not have chosen a better night for running away. That is, for running away without being found out. Father Blossom hurried off to his lodge meeting directly after dinner, and then the telephone bell rang and Mrs. Ward, a neighbor who lived near, asked Mother Blossom and Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda to come over to her house and spend the evening.

"I ought to be packing our things," said Aunt Miranda, when Mother Blossom told her. "But we're not going till the eleven o'clock train, and I suppose I'll have time in the morning; I'd like to go, Margaret, and so would Dave."

That left Norah in charge of the house and of the four litttle Blossoms, and she sent them to bed the minute the clock struck eight. Norah believed that all children should go to bed early

and it never did any good to coax her to let one stay up a single second past bedtime hour. She waited till they were all in bed, then put out the lights in their rooms, raised the windows and went downstairs to read her paper in the kitchen.

"It's an awful long time till ten o'clock," said Bobby to himself, crawling out of bed as soon as he heard Norah close the door at the foot of the back stairs. "I hope I don't go to sleep before it's time to start."

Bobby had not meant to undress, for when he and the boys talked it over they had decided that the best way would be to go to bed fully dressed and then pull the covers up and if anyone peeped into their bedrooms they would look as usual. But Bobby had reckoned without Norah who announced that she expected to see clothes "folded up as they belong on chairs and not scattered all about." Bobby knew that if Norah went through his room and saw no clothes neatly folded she would immediately want to know where they were. So he had had to undress and get into his pajamas as he always did.

Bobby had a small room to himself, while the

twins slept in a larger connecting room and Meg had her own little room.

"I s'pose Meg will be kind of sorry," said Bobby, trying to dress quietly, and without snapping on the light. "But she would be sorrier if I stayed here and Mr. Bennett put me in prison. Mother wouldn't like that, either. I wonder what Mr. Bennett will say when he finds we've gone."

As soon as he was dressed, Bobby tiptoed into Mother Blossom's room to look at her little ivory clock. It was only half-past eight!

"I wish I'd told the fellows nine o'clock," thought Bobby. "But there would be a lot of people coming home from the movies then and they might see us. I guess I can read till a quarter of, and then I'll go."

He found a magazine on the table by the bed and he took that and Father Blossom's pocket flashlight which lay near and went back into his own room and lay down on the floor and read the stories, not daring to turn on the electric light lest someone come home and see a light in his room when he was supposed to be asleep.

He had to put the quilt over him, because, even though he had closed the window, the room was cold. Norah had carefully turned off the heat before she went downstairs.

Bobby was so wide awake that he knew he wouldn't go to sleep and he was very much surprised when his head struck the floor with a bump.

"Why—I guess I went to sleep!" he whispered. "I hope it isn't after ten o'clock!"

He hurried across the hall to look at the ivory clock. It said twenty minutes of ten. Bobby's heart thumped a little as he went back to his room and felt around for the handkerchief he had tied up that afternoon and hidden on the floor of his closet. He found it and then crept carefully into the hall, afraid that Dot would hear him and call out. She was a light sleeper and woke easily.

"I'll slide down the banisters," he decided when he reached the stairs. "Then the stairs can't creak and make a noise."

Once in the downstairs hall, it was easy to get his hat and coat and rubber boots. A light

shone under the kitchen door, proof that Norah was still there. Probably she would sit up till Mother Blossom came home. Bobby let himself out of the front door and closed it very gently. Then he was possessed to run around to the back of the house and make sure that Norah had not taken it into her head to go upstairs and look for him.

"Oh—my!" gasped Bobby with a half grunt as he turned the corner of the house. He had walked into Mr. White, whose existence he had forgotten. There was no moon and the dark was pretty black until one got used to it.

Bobby walked around the snowman and then he could see the light streaming from the kitchen windows. Norah seldom pulled down the shades. He could see her sitting at the table, her paper propped up against her mending basket. Sam sat on the other side of the table, reading a book. Philip was stretched out before the fire, and Annabel Lee dozed in a cushioned rocking chair.

"Sam could take us in the car," thought Bobby, carefully picking his way out of the

yard. "He could take us to—to Mexico, I guess! But he'd want to tell Daddy first, and Daddy wouldn't let us go, maybe."

There were not many street lights in Oak Hill and the street where the Blossoms lived was not much traveled after dark. So Bobby had to go slowly, feeling his way till he reached the corner where an arc light burned.

"Hello, Bobby!" whispered a voice, and Fred Baldwin stepped out of the shadows. Palmer Davis was behind him.

"Where's Bertrand?" asked Bobby.

"Hasn't come yet—he's always late," said Fred, who thought that everyone should be as prompt as he was.

"Maybe he can't get away," said Palmer mildly. "My mother most caught me as I was going out the door. Suppose she had!"

"Your father go to lodge meeting?" Fred asked Bobby. "So'd mine and Palmer's too, and I think Bertrand's father was going. Wonder where he is now."

Fred meant Bertrand, not his father, and just

as he finished speaking, that small boy came up to them, panting.

"I ran all the way," he said. "Is it late? My mother had company in the parlor and my big sister was making candy in the kitchen. So I couldn't get out till I thought of sliding down the porch trellis."

"Wasn't it icy?" asked Bobby.

"Oh, yes, it was icy," admitted Bertrand cheerfully. "But I don't care, long as I got here!"

"Where we going?" asked Fred, looking at Bobby for directions.

"I think we'd better walk till we come to a barn," planned Bobby. "Folks always sleep in a barn when they run away from home."

"Where'll we get anything to eat?" suggested Palmer Davis. "I'm hungry already."

"I brought some buns," said Bertrand, hastily untying a small package he carried. "We can eat these as we go along."

They started to walk uptown, keeping close together and munching the buns as they walked. The packed snow deadened the noise of their

footfalls and there was not a sound anywhere. Here and there a light shone out from the houses they passed, but most folk in Oak Hill went to bed before ten o'clock unless there happened to be a party.

"Mr. Bennett has a watchman all night at the shop," said Bertrand presently. "I saw him when I came out of our house. He has a little shanty to stay in and a stove to keep him warm."

"What's he supposed to do?" asked Bobby, wishing that everything didn't look so queer and spooky at night.

"Why, the grocery boy says Mr. Bennett is trying to get more insurance and he won't have anything touched till that's settled," explained Bertrand, who certainly heard everything that was ever said anywhere in his vicinity. "He thinks we'll come pawing over the ruins, the grocery boy says."

They had reached the business section of the town now and Bobby, looking ahead, made out the dim outline of a figure coming toward them. They would meet under the next arc light, unless the boys could hide.

"Sh—there's somebody coming!" he whispered. "We don't want 'em to see us. Let's cross over to the other side."

"That'll look funny," objected Fred. "Just walk ahead and don't say anything or look up; nobody will know us."

Alas for Fred's hope! To Bobby's terror and despair, as he was doggedly tramping past the stranger, his coat collar turned up and his hands deep in his pockets, he felt a grasp on his shoulder.

"Robert!" said Father Blossom's voice sternly, "what are you doing out here at this time of night?"

The boys stopped as if they had been shot, and poor Bobby turned furiously on Fred.

"I *told* you we ought to have crossed over," he said angrily. "Now see what you've done!"

"But what are you doing?" asked Father Blossom. "That's more important. Does Mother know where you are, Bobby?"

"No, not exactly," admitted Bobby.

"I've just left your father, Fred," said Father

Blossom, recognizing Fred in the dim light. "Does he know you are uptown?"

Fred stood on one foot and then the other and finally muttered that he supposed he didn't.

Father Blossom touched the knotted handkerchief Bobby carried, gently.

"What is this, Son?" he asked.

"Things," said Bobby uncomfortably. "My knife and the kneaded rubber, and—and some more things."

"Are you running away?" said Father Blossom and the suddenness of the question took Bobby by surprise. The other boys stared in astonishment at Bobby's father. How in the world had he managed to guess so quickly?

"I see you are," said Father Blossom, as no no one answered. "And what are you running away from, boys?"

"Mr. Bennett," said Bobby jerkily. "He says he's going to have us arrested."

"And we'll have to go to prison," put in Palmer Davis.

Father Blossom looked at the circle of wor-

ried little faces and smiled. Then he became very grave.

"I doubt very much if Mr. Bennett will have you arrested," he said. "I have heard a new story tonight that puts the blame on some tramps seen hanging around the shop after you boys went in to get your ball. There is too much doubt about the affair for Mr. Bennett to risk getting out warrants. But, suppose he did: do you think I want my son, and would your fathers want you, to run away instead of facing this trouble and seeing it through?"

"But I thought you wouldn't like me to be arrested," cried Bobby. "And all the girls in school would tease Meg."

"I don't want you arrested," said Father Blossom earnestly, "and Meg would feel very bad if that should happen and so would Mother. But, Bobby, that would be something you could not help. People can not help getting into trouble sometimes, but they can always help being afraid. You are running away because you are afraid of what may happen."

Bobby and the other boys were silent.

"A good soldier always faces the music," said Father Blossom. "Surely you are not going to turn your backs and run?"

Bobby looked from Palmer to Fred and then at Bertrand. They looked gloomy but not frightened.

"All right," sighed Bobby, "we'll go back. Nobody can say we are cowards."

CHAPTER XIII

CHARLOTTE GORDON'S PARTY

UNCLE DAVE and Aunt Miranda went home the next morning. They did not know that Bobby had almost run away. Neither did Meg and the twins. Mother Blossom knew, for Father Blossom told her. But she only hugged Bobby when she came into his room to call him the next morning and whispered that he must never think of running away and leaving her, no matter what happened.

"I couldn't get along without my big boy," she said earnestly.

Bobby and Father Blossom had reached home before Mother Blossom and Uncle Dave and Aunt Miranda came in from Mrs. Ward's, so Bobby had been spared any explanations. He himself told Meg several weeks afterward and she was much surprised to hear what he had planned to do.

The carpenter apparently had not made up his mind that the boys were responsible for the destruction of his shop, for he caused no arrests to be made. Father Blossom and Fred's father found out that one of the tramps seen around the shop was supposed to have once worked for Mr. Bennett, but beyond that they could not get a description of the men.

"But if they set fire to the shop, we'll find them," said Father Blossom. "You tell the boys to stop worrying over this, Bobby. No one is going to do anything to you, and sooner or later you'll hear that Mr. Bennett has discovered who burned down his shop."

A cold snap that brought wonderful skating helped Bobby and his chums to forget their troubles. And when Charlotte Gordon, one of the girls in Bobby's class at school, sent out invitations for a New Year's party, they were sure that nothing could ever bother them again.

"Isn't she nice to ask me!" exclaimed Meg, when she came home from the ice pond one afternoon to find two square pink invitations on the hall table, one addressed to Bobby and one

to herself. "Hester Scott told me this morning that she invited all your class, Bobby, but I'm in the next grade. Hester didn't get an invitation."

"I suppose Charlotte thought it would be nice to ask you, because of Bobby," said Mother Blossom. "When I was a little girl I always went to parties with my brother."

"But she forgot us!" chorused the twins excitedly. "Can't we go, Mother?" Maybe Charlotte didn't know about us."

Mother Blossom laughed and said she thought that Charlotte knew about Dot and Twaddles.

"You wouldn't have much fun at this party, dears," she told the disappointed youngsters. "The children who are asked are several years older than you; I'll tell you what we'll do when Meg and Bobby go to the party. We'll have one of our own. Dot may set the dolls' table and Norah will give her something good to eat and I will come upstairs and play with you myself. How will that please you?"

The twins loved to have Mother Blossom play with them and they did not mind about the

party with such a pleasant day to look forward to. Although New Year's Day was nearly a week off, Dot teased Norah to tell her what they could have to eat and Twaddles helped to set the doll table so many times that he broke two of the cups and saucers.

"Going to Charlotte Gordon's party?" asked Fred Baldwin when he met Bobby in the grocery store the morning after the invitations had been sent out. "You are? So'm I. But what do you think, she's asked Tim Roon and Charlie Black. I wouldn't have them at my birthday party last summer; they're too mean to invite to a party, I think."

"Maybe Charlotte is polite 'cause she is a girl," ventured Bobby.

"Shucks, it's just because they're in our class," retorted Fred. "She could have left them out, as well as not. But she invited every single boy and girl. Meg's the only one asked outside the class."

Meg was much pleased when she heard this.

"I think Charlotte is lovely," she said. "And

why shouldn't she invite Tim Roon and Charlie Black? I guess they like to go to parties."

"Well, I hope they know how to act," remarked Bobby. "But I don't believe they do."

New Year's Day finally came—though Meg and Bobby thought it never would—and in the afternoon they went gaily off to Charlotte's party. Very nice they looked, too, Meg in a white wool frock and wearing blue hair-ribbons and her beloved blue locket which she had lost and found the winter before. Bobby wore his best suit and shiny patent leather shoes.

"We're going to have a party, too!" the twins called after them, and Meg and Bobby turned to wave their hands to show that they understood.

Charlotte Gordon lived in the largest house in Oak Hill. The Gordons had moved to Oak Hill from Chicago and everyone liked them for, although they had a great deal of money and kept three cars and a staff of servants, Mrs. Gordon did not forget or try to make other people forget that her father had kept the grocery store in Oak Hill for years and that she had gone to school with many of the Oak Hill folk. She

sent her daughter to the same school now, and Charlotte was a lovely little girl, dark-eyed and pretty and with her mother's own charming manners and way of keeping friends.

"I'm so glad you could come," said Mrs. Gordon kissing Meg as she met her in the hall. "Charlotte will show you where to put your things, dear. Bobby, you'll find some of the boys upstairs who will tell you where to go."

Upstairs in Charlotte's room Meg found a little group of girls shaking out their hair-ribbons and comparing dresses and slippers.

"What a darling locket!" said Eleanor Gray, when Meg took off her coat. "I never saw one like it."

"It belonged to my great-aunt Dorothy," explained Meg. "My Aunt Polly gave it to me. I love it because it's blue."

In a room across the hall, Bobby found the boys. He knew them all because he saw them every day in school. Fred and Bertrand and Palmer were there and Tim Roon and Charlie Black who were already trying to do hand-

springs over the beautiful carved mahogany bed with its blue satin cover.

"Come on downstairs and don't act foolish," growled Palmer, as Tim landed in the center of the bed. "That's no way to behave at a party."

"I guess I know how to act as well as you do," retorted Tim. "But I'm ready to go down. I I want to tell Mrs. Gordon to have the fire extinguishers ready in case of a fire."

Bobby colored angrily, but Fred pinched him to remind him to keep still.

"Wait till we get him outside, and we can punch him," whispered Fred. "But I don't think it would be very nice to start a row in here."

Bobby didn't think so, either, and with an effort he kept from "talking back" to Tim. Everyone went downstairs and Mrs. Gordon announced that they would have a Virginia reel first.

"Everyone can dance that," she said. "I'll play for you. And you must keep your partners for the first game."

To Meg's surprise, and small pleasure, Tim

Roon asked her to dance with him. She wanted Bobby for her partner for she did not know how to dance well, but Meg was a polite little girl and she did not know how to refuse Tim without offending him. She did not enjoy the reel very much, though, for Tim was clumsy and stepped on her feet often and besides he tormented her by twitching her hair-ribbon whenever he thought no one would see him.

"Now we're going to play a game," announced kind Mrs. Gordon when the dance was finished. "Keep the same partners you had for the reel, children. All sit on the floor in a circle, and close your eyes. I am going to pass something around and let you guess what it is by smelling it."

The children sat down in a circle, Tim on one side of Meg, Charlie Black on the other. Mrs. Gordon went around back of them and held a small bottle for each one to smell. Such wild guesses! Fred Baldwin thought it was camphor, and Bobby was sure it was cologne.

"I think it's vinegar," said Meg when her turn came.

She had guessed it and she guessed the next test, also, which was a pickle cut up in tiny bits so that each child had a taste. If you think you can tell a pickle every time, try it some day when your eyes are closed and you have not seen what you are going to eat.

"We'll let Meg test you for the sense of touch," said Mrs. Gordon, smiling. "Give them something of yours to feel, Meg, and see if they can guess what it is."

Without hesitation, Meg unclasped her locket and passed it around the circle. No one could guess what it was. Tim Roon was the last to handle it and finally he "gave up."

"It was my locket," explained Meg dimpling. And then Mrs. Gordon said they would play another game.

This was to answer "Happy New Year" to every question asked without laughing and they had been playing several minutes before Meg realized that Tim had not given her back her locket. She waited till the game was over and then asked him for it.

"I haven't your locket," said Tim. "I gave

it back to you. Have you gone and lost it again?"

Meg was sure he had not given it back, but she looked about the room carefully. She could not find it. When they marched out to supper it was still missing and she was afraid to say anything to Bobby who did not like Tim Roon, she knew.

"He might hit him, or something," reasoned Meg. "I *know* I didn't lose my locket, but folks might think I did. I lost it once and they think I'm careless, I guess."

She could not half enjoy the delicious goodies and when they went back to play more games after supper, Meg stole away by herself to have a little cry. She had hidden herself in one of the big leather chairs in the book-lined room across the hall which was Mr. Gordon's library and she was sobbing quietly when suddenly a deep voice said, "Well, bless me, and who is this?"

A tall, gray-haired gentleman stood looking down at her. Meg knew he must be Mr. Gordon. When he found she couldn't stop crying

he sat down and took her on his lap and by and by Meg found she could tell him about the lost locket and Tim and Bobby.

"And I did lose it once," she explained, "and perhaps I lost it this time, but I know I didn't."

"You stay here," said Mr. Gordon shortly.

He went away and in a few minutes he came back and Tim Roon, looking very frightened and ashamed, was with him.

"Tim has something to give you, Meg," said Mr. Gordon.

Silently Tim gave her her locket and Meg was so glad to get it back she thanked Tim as though he had found it for her.

"If you don't say anything about it, Meg won't," Mr. Gordon told him. "I don't like Charlotte's party to be disturbed and I would rather she did not know what a mean boy she has invited as a friend. Come, Meg, we'll go back before they begin to wonder where you are."

Bobby had been looking for Meg and he was surprised to see her come in with Mr. Gordon. It was almost time to go home and after they

had unwound the spider web of strings which brought them each a gift, the party was over.

"I hope you'll have a party every day in the year," said Palmer Davis, trying to be very polite when he said good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Gordon.

"That would give us a gay new year, if not a happy one, wouldn't it?" Mrs. Gordon answered him laughingly. "Well, you should all be invited, my dears."

CHAPTER XIV

DOT READS A STORY

MEG told Bobby about her locket as they walked home and he was very indignant.

"Just let me catch that Tim Roon!" he said wrathfully. "He's always trying to bother someone. I don't believe you would ever have got your locket back if it hadn't been for Mr. Gordon."

"Oh, Tim wouldn't keep it—that would be stealing," said Meg who liked to think the best of everyone. "He only wanted to tease me; I know he would have let me have it after a while. But I was afraid he would lose it or break it."

New Year's Day was, of course, on Tuesday just a week after Christmas, and school was to open the next Monday. So Meg and Bobby determined to have all the fun they could before they had to go back to lessons.

"Mother, they say the skating on Blake's pond is wonderful," said Meg at breakfast the morning after the party. "Better than ever. The ice is eight feet thick!"

"Now Meg," protested Father Blossom, his eyes twinkling at her over the top of his paper, "are you sure it isn't eight inches you mean?"

"Well, maybe it is eight inches," admitted Meg. "But that is thick, isn't it, Daddy? And Bobby and I want to go this morning, because they say the high school crowd is going to skate all the afternoon and we couldn't have much fun then."

Mother Blossom moved the sugar bowl away from Twaddles who seemed to want to pour sugar on his oatmeal, and said she had a question to ask Meg.

"I've often wondered, Daughter," said Mother Blossom, "who 'they' are; you're always quoting what 'they' say, Meg, and yet you seldom use any names."

"They are—they are—well, I guess I mean everybody," explained Meg. "Everybody says the skating is wonderful, Mother. You don't

care if Bobby and I go this morning do you?"

"Let Twaddles and me go?" said Dot eagerly. "Mother, can't we go skating, too?"

Father Blossom looked across the table at Mother, and laughed.

"Now the argument begins," he remarked whimsically. "A little more coffee, please, Norah, to fortify me."

"Oh, Mother, don't let the twins go!" said Bobby hastily. "We can't have a bit of fun with them around. They get in the way, and Twaddles won't stay off the pond, and they always want to come home before we do."

"I think you're a mean boy!" stormed poor Twaddles. "You and Meg are selfish. You have all the fun—you went to a party yesterday and Dot and I didn't go."

"No, but you had a party home with Mother," Meg told him. "Norah said you had cocoanut layer cake and cocoa in the yellow pot."

"Yes, we had a lovely party," said Mother Blossom cheerfully. "And twinnies, if you don't go skating this morning, I'll think of something pleasant for you to do in the house."

"It's a very cold day," said Father Blossom, folding up his paper and taking his fur-lined gloves (which Santa Claus had brought him) from the window sill. "Quite too cold for anyone to go out who doesn't have to. I don't think Meg and Bobby will stay at the pond very long; and small folks like Dot and Twaddles mustn't think of taking such a long walk."

"Oh, Daddy!" cried Dot, disappointment in her voice.

"Oh, Dot!" said Father Blossom, kissing her. "Be a good girl, honey, and tonight when I come home, we'll pop corn at the fireplace."

Sam brought the car around in a moment and took Father Blossom off to the busy foundry. Dot, with her nose pressed against the window pane, was trying not to cry when her attention was attracted by a farm wagon going slowly past.

"What a lot of noise that wagon makes!" she said aloud. "Why doesn't the man oil it the way Jud used to oil Aunt Polly's wagons?"

"That wagon doesn't need oiling," Norah answered. She was clearing the breakfast table

and had heard Dot's remark. "Wagons always creak like that in cold weather. You can tell by that it's a very cold day."

Bobby and Meg bundled up warmly and taking their skates from the hall closet, hurried off to the pond. They promised Mother Blossom to come home the moment they felt cold.

"The big boys will have a bonfire on the ice," said Bobby. "We can warm our hands there, Mother."

"Don't go near the fire unless there are older people around," warned Mother Blossom. "You can't always tell what a bonfire is going to do, Bobby."

As soon as Meg and Bobby were out of sight, the twins teased Mother Blossom to tell them what they could do.

"You haven't played school in a long time," suggested Mother Blossom. "Or don't you want to play school during the holidays?"

"We're tired of playing school," objected Twaddles.

"You mean you're tired of the old way you play it," said Mother Blossom. "I don't be-

lieve you have ever played you were a college professor, have you, Twaddles? Take the old glasses and pretend you're a professor like the ones who taught Daddy in college."

"But what'll I do with Dot?" asked Twaddles anxiously.

"Why, Twaddles Blossom!" Mother Blossom pretended to scold. "Dot will go to college of course. Isn't she going when she is a big girl? You may be the professor and Dot one of your students."

"But, Mother, I don't know how to play college," said Twaddles. "Dot doesn't, either. You tell us how."

Mother Blossom thought a moment. She was used to planning plays for the twins and even Meg and Bobby sometimes came and asked her to tell them "something to play."

"Why don't you hold entrance examinations, Twaddles?" said Mother Blossom, after she had thought while the twins watched her anxiously. "Play that Dot wants to come to college and you must try her out and see if she knows enough to come into your class. You might

read aloud for him, Dot, and pretend that he is a professor of English."

So Twaddles and Dot ran up to the playroom and got out all the toys without which they thought they couldn't play school. Twaddles put on the big spectacles that had no glasses in them—which were among his choicest possessions—and Dot sat down to read to him.

Neither child could read, though they knew their alphabet fairly well. But Dot had an excellent memory and knew many stories that had been read aloud to her, and now she opened a book and pretended to be reading from it to Twaddles.

"Begin," said the professor kindly.

"Once upon a time," read Dot, "there was the nicest girl you ever saw. Her name was Cinderella. Her sisters were so mean to her she said 'I won't stay with you any more' and she ran away. They wouldn't let her go skating with them," added Dot, glancing up from her book at Professor Twaddles, who nodded to show he understood.

"Cinderella went on a ship across the ocean,"

continued Dot, "and the ship was wrecked in the middle of the ocean and the wind blew her ashore. While she was blowing through the air she saw another person in the water and he was Robinson Crusoe. 'Catch hold of my sash,' said Cinderella, 'and I will pull you ashore.' And he did, and they both landed on a desert island," and now Dot stopped to get her breath and see what effect the story was having on the professor. He was staring at her through his glasses in amazement.

"Aren't you mixing Cinderella up with another story?" he asked doubtfully.

"That's all right," Dot answered airily. "I like different stories. Besides," she added, "I'm reading to you from the book."

"Oh!" said the professor. "Excuse me; go on."

"As soon as Cinderella and Robinson Crusoe found they were on an island," went on Dot, "they thought they would look around and see if anyone lived there they knew. They went to all the houses and rang the doorbells——"

"How could they if it was a desert island?"

interrupted Twaddles. "Nobody lives on a desert island."

"Well, they did on this one," retorted Dot. "Cinderella was afraid to ring the doorbells, but Robinson Crusoe went right up and punched 'em hard. And when the folks came to the door, if he didn't know them, he said he hoped they would excuse him."

"I don't believe they have doorbells, either," murmured Professor Twaddles, but Dot paid no attention to him. She was determined to finish her story.

"Pretty soon they came to a house," she continued, "where little Red Riding Hood lived. She was very glad to see them and when they asked her to take a walk, she said she would. And they walked and they walked, and by and by they came to a deep, dark forest."

Dot paused and shook her finger at the professor.

"The Three Bears lived in that wood," she said slowly. "And they came out to eat them up! The Big Bear said he would eat Cinderella and the Middle Bear was going to eat

Robinson Crusoe and the Little Bear said he would eat little Red Riding Hood."

"Did they?" asked Twaddles with interest.

"No, they didn't," replied Dot. "There was a Fairy Tree at the edge of the wood and Jack the Giant Killer lived inside it. He heard the Three Bears talking and he jumped right out of that tree and killed them with his hatchet. And, after that, a ship came and got Cinderella and the others, too, and took them home. And they all lived happily ever after."

CHAPTER XV

MR. BENNETT SHAKES HANDS

BEFORE Professor Twaddles could say what he thought of this remarkable story, the bang of the front door sent him and Dot flying into the hall to see who had come. It was Bobby and Meg who had come home because of the cold.

"Hardly anyone at the pond," reported Bobby, blowing on his fingers and stamping up and down to warm his feet. "Let's ask Mother if we may make candy."

The four little Blossoms enjoyed a grand taffy pull, and in the afternoon they played "menagerie" in the playroom, using the animal suits left over from the play they had given a year before.

The next morning Father Blossom said the weather was milder, and Meg and Bobby were eager to try the pond again. The twins begged so hard to be allowed to go, and promised so

eagerly to do everything they were asked to do, that it would have taken a harder-hearted brother and sister than Bobby and Meg to have refused them.

"Maybe next year we'll have skates," said Twaddles as he pattered along, trying to keep up with Bobby.

"Daddy was going to get you some for Christmas," explained Bobby, "but Mother said next year would be better. You can watch Meg and me skate."

The pond was well filled this morning and most of Bobby's and Meg's friends were there. A blazing bonfire was burning down close to the edge of the pond and the girls sat around this to put on their skates.

"You kids want to stay away from the fire," said Stanley Reeves, skating up just as the four little Blossoms reached the pond. "And if I catch any boy taking a stick out to play with, I'll paddle him with it, sure as you're born!"

Everyone laughed for Stanley was as good natured as he was tall—and he was the tallest boy in his class in high school.

"You think I'm fooling, but I mean it," he said seriously. "Fire is nothing to play with."

"'Less you want to burn down a carpenter shop!" shouted Tim Roon. Then he skated away, with Fred Baldwin after him.

"Don't you mind him," whispered Meg to Bobby, as they joined hands and struck out across the ice. "He just likes to be mean."

It did seem as though Tim liked to be mean. He and Charlie Black, instead of skating off with the others, hung around the edges of the pond and tried to tease the younger children who were amusing themselves by making slides on the ice. There were half a dozen who had no skates and these played with Twaddles and Dot. Left alone, they would have had a happy time, but Tim and Charlie continually tormented them. Finally when Tim put out his foot and tripped Morgan Smith, a boy about a year older than Twaddles, for the third time, that quick-tempered lad lost his last shred of patience.

"I'll fix you!" he shouted, and grabbing a long burning stick from the fire he started after Tim.

The other children scattered and Morgan, his stick leaving a trail of fire behind him, was running after Tim when Twaddles cried a warning.

"Look out! Stanley's coming!" he called.

Morgan turned, but not quickly enough to throw the stick back in the fire. Stanley skated up to him and not even Mr. Carter, the twins thought, could look more severe than he did.

"What do you mean, pulling a stick out of the fire like that?" demanded Stanley. "Don't you know the little Davis girl was burned yesterday doing that? I've a good mind to spank you with that very stick."

This was too much for Twaddles, who saw Tim grinning on the edge of the crowd.

"I think you ought to spank Tim Roon," said Twaddles clearly. "He tripped Morgan three times and he won't leave us alone."

"Is that so?" said Stanley. "Well, in that case I think I'll excuse you, Morgan. But next time you leave fire alone. And Tim, I'll attend to you if I hear you've been bothering children younger than yourself again."

Tim skated off muttering that "he guessed

Stanley Reeves didn't own the whole pond." Yet after that the children had their slide in peace. Bobby and Meg called the twins when the whistles blew at twelve o'clock and they went home to lunch.

Mother Blossom said that no one should try to skate all day, so Meg and the twins stayed home in the afternoon. But Bobby was due at the dentist's at three o'clock. His teeth needed cleaning only and he did not dread the visit to kind Dr. Ward.

"Stop in the grocery, will you, Bobby," said Norah as he was leaving the house. "And bring me a bottle of vanilla. I find I haven't a drop in the bottle."

Bobby promised, and as soon as Dr. Ward had finished with him, he crossed over to the grocery store to get Norah's vanilla.

"Heard about the tramps?" asked the clerk who waited on him.

Bobby asked what tramps and the clerk glanced at him curiously.

"Thought you'd know all about it," he said. "Why, the constable's arrested two tramps he

caught hanging around the railroad station. Guess they were waiting for a freight—there's one goes through at two-thirty. They say one of 'em used to work for Bennett, the carpenter, and the other is a pal of his. Folks say they may know something about the fire at the shop last fall."

Bobby took the bottle of vanilla the clerk gave him and bolted out of the store without a word. He ran all the way home and burst into the house so breathless that he had to wait a minute before he could speak.

"Where's Mother?" he asked Norah, who came into the hall to get her vanilla.

"Upstairs," she answered. "What have you been doing, Bobby? Your face is as red as a beet."

Bobby dashed upstairs without answering, and met Meg in the upstairs hall.

"Where's Mother?" he asked again.

"Up in the attic, hunting for some red flannel to make a new tongue for Dot's teddy bear," replied Meg. "What do you want, Bobby?"

Bobby was already half way up the attic

stairs and Meg flew after him. Mother Blossom and the twins were looking over the contents of one of the rag bags in the middle of the attic floor and they were surprised when Bobby rushed toward them crying, "They've found the tramps, Mother! They 'rested two of them and one used to work for Mr. Bennett! The clerk in the grocery store says so!"

"Why, Bobby!" said Mother Blossom, reaching up and pulling her "big boy" as she often called Bobby, into her lap. "Why, Bobby, dear! Tell me about it, quick."

Meg sat down on the floor to listen and Dot and Twaddles hung over Mother Blossom's shoulder.

"I don't know much about it," said Bobby excitedly. "But the grocery store clerk told me the constable arrested two tramps this afternoon. He said folks said they might know something about the fire. And Daddy said so that night."

"What night?" asked Dot curiously.

"Oh—a night," replied Bobby. The twins had never learned of his attempt to run away and he did not intend to tell them now. "Daddy

said he heard two tramps were seen hanging around the carpenter shop the afternoon before it burned."

"Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling!" the sound of the telephone bell came faintly up the attic stairs.

"I'll answer it!" cried Meg, jumping to her feet.

"No, let me!" shouted Bobby, running after her. Mother Blossom ran, too, and so did Dot and Twaddles who thought this was all great fun.

"Mr. Blossom wants to speak to you, ma'am," said Norah, as Mother Blossom reached the first floor hall where the telephone was placed. "He says it's important."

The four little Blossoms stood around expectantly and listened eagerly while Mother Blossom said "Yes, Ralph," and "No, indeed," and "I'm so glad."

You know how one-sided a telephone conversation sounds. Finally Mother Blossom hung up the receiver.

"Daddy says Mr. Baldwin telephoned him about the tramps and that he is going with him

and Mr. Davis and Mr. Ashe to the recorder's office right away," said Mother Blossom. "Then, as soon as he has anything to tell us, he'll come home and we shall know all there is to know."

You may imagine how the four little Blossoms glued their faces to the front windows to watch for Father Blossom, and what a racket they made when the car turned in the drive. They were out on the porch in a minute, dancing in the cold like four little wild Indians.

"Come in, come in," said Father Blossom laughing as they pounced upon him. "You are not little Eskimos, you know. Yes, Bobby, I'll tell you everything in a minute. Let me get my gloves off. Don't strangle me, Dot; I need my breath to talk with."

As soon as he was settled before the fire in the living-room, the four children sitting in a row on the hearth rug and Mother Blossom in her chair opposite, Father Blossom told them what he had learned that afternoon.

"Mr. Baldwin telephoned me as soon as he heard of the arrest of the tramps," said Father

Blossom, "and I came into town at once and met him and Mr. Davis and Mr. Ashe at Recorder Scott's office. Mr. Bennett was also there. The tramps didn't seem to be bad fellows only shiftless and careless. One of them had worked for Mr. Bennett several years ago.

"The recorder gave them an informal hearing and though vagrancy was the charge against them, he began to question them about where they had been and what towns they stopped in during the last few months. He surprised them into admitting that they were in Oak Hill around Thanksgiving time and though they denied they had been in the carpenter shop, he finally drove them into a corner and one of them owned up to having slept in the shop the night it burned. The man said they were cold and they found the shop window open and crawled in, meaning to stay till morning. They smoked a pipe or two and then went to sleep. The crackling of flames awoke them, and they found the shop on fire. Though they were terribly frightened, they were good enough to grope through the smoke and heat till they found the

cat and tossed her out of the window. Then they broke down the door and got out and ran for dear life. Naturally they were not anxious to be charged with setting the fire."

"But if they were seen around the shop, why weren't they traced?" asked Mother Blossom. "How could Mr. Bennett suspect five little boys?"

"Oh, boys and mischief go together in some people's minds," said Father Blossom, smiling at Bobby. "And the tramps were sixty miles away before morning. They caught a fast freight out of town. But now everyone in Oak Hill knows who set the fire, for good news travels fast."

Bobby felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his mind. Back in his head, ever since the fire and Mr. Bennett's charge that he and his chums were responsible, had been the question: "Does everyone think I did it?" Now he knew that everyone knew and, best of all, he could go back to school with no fear of being taunted with being a "fire-bug."

"Will the tramps have to go to prison?" he asked Father Blossom that night.

"No, not to prison, I think," replied Father Blossom. "It will depend to some extent on Mr. Bennett. But no one can do wrong and not be punished, Bobby. Sooner or later, we have to pay for wrong doing and mistakes."

Saturday Meg and Bobby went together for the last afternoon of skating they could enjoy before school opened. The holidays were almost over. Bobby had his skates on first and he and Fred and Palmer were racing across the pond to see who could reach the other side and be back before Meg should be ready, when Bobby heard his sister give a little cry.

"Tim's teasing her!" shouted Bobby angrily. "Just wait till I get him!"

But Stanley Reeves had seen Tim skate up and take Meg's mittens which lay on the ice beside her. He was a splendid skater, was Stanley, and he easily overtook the grinning Tim.

"I owe you one licking, Tim, and now you're going to get it," said Stanley, dragging Tim

back to where Meg and Bobby and the other children stood. "Hand over those mittens and say you're sorry you took 'em!"

Tim mumbled something that sounded like "sorry."

"Ask him if he gave Bobby the coal for Christmas in school," said Bertrand Ashe suddenly.

"Did you?" asked Stanley, shaking Tim as though he hoped by that method to shake the truth out of him.

Tim nodded miserably.

"Then say you're sorry," ordered Stanley and again Tim mumbled an apology.

"All right. And here's something to make you a better boy," said Stanley turning the astonished Tim over his knee. And, being much older and a strong and athletic lad, he did manage to spank Tim thoroughly in spite of his shrieks and kicks.

Tim fled as soon as he was released and for at least two weeks gave his schoolmates and teachers no trouble at all. As Stanley said, someone

ought to spank him often enough and he would probably be a very good child.

On their way home from the pond that afternoon, Bobby and Meg met the carpenter. Bobby had not seen Mr. Bennett since the day he accused him of setting fire to his shop. Now he stopped and held out his hand.

"Hope I know enough to say I was mistaken," he said. "Will you shake hands, Bobby? I'm mighty sorry I blundered."

Bobby shook hands with a beaming face. All the way home he walked on air.

"Everybody's nice," he announced at dinner that night, "when you know them."

And here let us say good-bye to the Four Little Blossoms.

THE END